

WHISPERING TREES

by Kenton Hammonds

A mystery adventure story.
For ages around 11 to adult.

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To Parents, Teachers and Guardians,

The book “Whispering Trees” is a mystery adventure story, set entirely in a fantasy world. With 32 chapters, and around 84,000 words, it is a medium-length novel.

No material normally considered unsuitable for children is present. In particular:

- It is not a horror book
- Contains no swearing
- Has no material of a sexual nature
- In terms of violence, none is wantonly barbaric or cruel

Therefore it is considered, by the author, to be suitable for all children who can read a book of this length, regardless of their age, but the suggested reading range is probably 11 years old or above.

The book is also entirely suitable for teenagers and adults, having a sufficiently deep plot, and well-developed characters, for it to be appreciated by the more mature reader.

Yours truly, Kenton Hammonds.

PS: This book is not guaranteed to be free of spelling errors, typing errors, formatting errors, grammatical errors, “loose English” and other interesting quibbles of language, sentence structure, or punctuation. However, it does read easily and well for the most part, which was always the main idea.

WHISPERING TREES

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Chapter Contents

1.	A Dot on a Map	2
2.	All Too Good to be True	6
3.	Red Tea and Ginger Buns	11
4.	Peaceful Gardens and Racing Horses	17
5.	Strange Visitors and Rolling Barrels	23
6.	Dangerous Objects and a Changing World	28
7.	Missing Stars and Nameless Forces	32
8.	The Aeon of Dark Mist	38
9.	A Game of Skill and Trouble with Axes	43
10.	The Most Horrible Story in History	49
11.	Lemon Drops and Invisible Cabbage	55
12.	Ancient Anvils	60
13.	Tunnels of Green Light	66
14.	Orange Sweets and Real Leadership	74
15.	Unusual Breakfasts	79
16.	Becoming the Best of Friends	84
17.	Lost Tempers and Dark Foreboding	89
18.	The Day of the Empire	96
19.	Strange Ships at WixWyn Harbour	100
20.	Tree Tops and a Reluctant Princess	105
21.	The Pictures in the Vaxen Gallery	110
22.	A Rail Cart Ride Beyond Belief	115
23.	Determined Warriors and Insane Ideas	119
24.	Waves of Plants	123
25.	Mad Wars and Red Ravens	130
26.	A Hideous Barrier	136
27.	Small Dogs and Floating Boxes	141
28.	Spiders, Secrets and Sandwiches	145
29.	The Star of Cold Blue	151
30.	An Epic New Challenge	157
31.	Extreme Danger and Whispering Trees	162
32.	Speckled Pebbles and the Start of Summer	166

**- Chapter 1 -
A Dot on a Map**

“What are we doing here?” whispered Jade.

“What do you think?” whispered Brandon.

“I don’t know,” whispered Jade again.

“Well you should!” huffed Brandon, who then walked quietly off into the hall.

Jade glanced around warily. The dark hall lay before her like a great chasm hewn out of solid rock. The ceiling looked as high as a three-storied house, and the hall was twice that in width. Its length appeared to stretch away from her, into the darkness, like the gigantic mouth of some cold terrible monster. It’s just an empty hall, Jade tried to tell herself. She eventually followed after Brandon to the other end, making her way past the old wooden tables and benches that were strewn about the floor like so much rubbish. Someone had certainly had a scrap in here, she thought.

Brandon had stopped at a wooden door to the right by the time Jade managed to catch up with him. She looked nervously around as he was trying the handle. It was certainly stiff, but not locked. Forcing it open caused a dark staircase to reveal itself on the other side. Shadows flickered menacingly off the walls from Brandon’s torch.

“Is this a good idea?” whispered Jade.

“Well of course it’s a good idea,” whispered Brandon.

Jade didn’t look at all convinced.

“You really are going to have to sort yourself out!” whispered Brandon again, while trying to peer through the

shadows beyond the door. “And another thing,” he carried on, “you really don’t have to whisper. There’s nobody here!”

Jade looked down at the floor sadly.

“I can’t help being afraid,” she said quietly.

“Well, you’re just going to have to get over it at some point,” replied Brandon. “This is the sort of thing we do all the time.”

Jade sighed. It was so hard not to be afraid. She didn’t know where the others got all their confidence from.

“You know what your problem is, young lady?” lectured Brandon.

Jade didn’t know what her problem was but felt sure Brandon didn’t know it either. That wasn’t going to stop him from telling her, however.

“You spend all your time reading books about monsters and ghosts and vampires and dark lords, who rule by terror over everyone and everything!” he then said.

Brandon was, by now, walking up the spiral steps he’d discovered. His voice echoed from around the curved walls of the tower he seemed to be in.

“And then you read stories about phantom armies of orcs and ghouls, who slip from one world to another, turning into stone everybody and everything who ever lived!”

Jade sighed again and followed her friend up the staircase. Brandon’s voice droned on.

“And after all that, it’s tales of hobgoblins and dragons and giant flying poisonous toadstools, who suck the life slowly out of their victims, leaving them with only one arm, one leg, and half a head each!”

Jade smiled. Brandon was actually quite good at making her feel better. But it was true about the books though. Jade

loved stories and was reading them all the time. And these stories were all about fantastic kingdoms and faraway countries, where heroes and heroines would travel from one world to another on unbelievable adventures. Of course, they also had to fight with all manner of evil creations, against completely impossible odds, until the dark foe was finally destroyed and the good guys had clearly won! Jade often wished a great fabulous story, like the ones she was always reading about, would come true one day in her world.

“And finally there are all those books you read about things that go bump, bump, rattle in the night,” finished Brandon.

By the time Brandon had shut up, the staircase levelled off. It continued onward a short distance away, but the floor had partially collapsed, leaving a nasty gaping hole in their path.

“I reckon we can creep round the edge,” said Brandon, giving his torch to Jade. “Better let me go first though.”

However, Brandon surveyed the scene again. This was actually quite dangerous, he decided. Creeping around the edge was a sure way to risk two broken legs, and two broken legs, way out here, was not a good idea. Seeing him hesitate, Jade piped up.

“Perhaps we can get some of those planks of wood lying in the hall, and use them as floorboards across the hole.”

“First good idea you’ve had tonight! Come on,” said Brandon.

Hence the two friends returned to the great dark hall, tested some of the stronger-looking bits of wood by jumping on them, and brought two of what seemed like really good planks back up the tower. Crossing the gap was now easy and they continued up the staircase. Every fifteen or so, the stone steps

levelled out and then went up again. They seemed to just go on and on and on.

“How high is this thing?” mumbled Jade, talking to herself rather than to Brandon.

Finally, after much effort, they reached the top. No door, just a stone archway leading onto a small round area, surrounded by a thick stone wall. Part of the stonework had fallen away leaving a dangerous gap. The tower top was open.

“Wow!” exclaimed Jade staring straight up at the clear night sky. “What a view!”

Brandon too gazed around. They must be about twenty storeys up, he reasoned. From here you could probably see more than a day’s horse ride in all directions, in clear bright weather. Looking far across the hall roof, to its other side, he could just about imagine a torch might be flickering from the top of the other remaining tower. A third such tower had collapsed to the ground, having fallen away from the hall years before.

“Looks like Rhea has done much the same as us,” said Brandon to Jade.

“Yes,” she agreed. “I can’t wait to come up here during daylight though. Just imagine the view!”

“Well, you’ll get a chance tomorrow,” said Brandon smiling.

The two of them then remained on the tower top for some time. They studied the stars, the moons, and the strange green Brodean nebula that filled a fair chunk of the Mi-Rethyn night sky. Both Jade and Brandon could easily make out the brighter constellations and knew their names, along with those of their leading stars.

“Doesn’t Catchlune look good shining yellow through its pale green hole in the nebula,” commented Jade.

Brandon nodded. The stars did seem very clear tonight. The two children then scanned the horizon for village lights and what have you, but there were none.

“From up here, it looks as if we’re the only ones alive in all the world,” said Jade in a dreamy sort of way.

A while later, Brandon eventually realised the torchlight on the other tower had disappeared.

“Come on, we should go down and make camp,” he said.

“All right, but I still can’t wait to come back up tomorrow,” repeated Jade again.

So the two young adventurers went down, met up with their other friend Rhea, set up a sort of makeshift camp in one corner of the great hall, and promptly fell asleep. This was despite Jade’s continual asking as to whether it was safe or not. The other two said she was more than welcome to stay up on her own and keep watch all night if she wished, but that didn’t go down too well.

“This place looks really different in sunshine,” said Jade in a lively tone the next morning, while gazing into the well-lit hall.

Huge arched windows along all four sides let in floods of light. Now it was almost as bright inside as it was out.

“Well, I’m glad you’ve cheered up. Last night we were all going to be gobbled up, as we slept, by spectres and wraiths!” commented Brandon.

Rhea smiled.

“At least the spectres and wraiths didn’t eat my last remaining pineapple,” she said, trying to cut the fruit with a not particularly sharp knife.

A moment later Jade was standing up, a large dripping slice of pineapple in one hand, a beaker of tepid water in the other.

“There really must have been some fight in here,” she commented.

Many of the hall’s wooden tables were completely smashed, and deep cuts were present in others. Probably from swords or lances, thought Jade, while chewing at her piece of fruit. I wonder what they were fighting about? Soon though, the children finished their simple breakfast and headed off to begin the extremely serious business of exploring the castle.

Rhea stood alone at the top of the principal tower, the one Brandon and Jade had climbed the previous night. Her steel blue eyes looked out across the bleakish landscape. She noticed presently, that in the distance, you could see differences in the colours for each of the faraway horizons. To the north were low mountain peaks with a dark complexion. To the south, bright sunlight made the rolling hills appear pure green. To the east, the horizon appeared grey under the gathering clouds, while to the west it seemed bluer than anything else. But the blue tinge of the western horizon was a trick of the light Rhea knew. Nature was always playing tricks on you she’d noticed, so things were often not what they seemed.

They had come from the west, from where the great Rift Wood lay, just over four days’ horse ride from their school. Not a particularly long way, Rhea thought, yet no one had been to this old castle for ages and ages. An enormous great big castle

like this one, stuck out in the middle of a desolate flat landscape, not visited for what seemed like decades on end? Something was amiss here surely.

Rhea also realised how quiet it was. She had seen no birds here and no animals around at all. Also, there appeared to be no wind. All this way up a tower, you would expect some kind of breeze to be blowing, but here there was very little. Looking down on the castle's main hall she continued to stand and sense the place, and could just make out Jade wandering about on ground level, looking the size of an ant!

Gradually an unsettling impression of sadness came over Rhea, as if the great castle had been abandoned, and left all alone, after some terrible event years before. According to records at the school, the place had been built as a lonely retreat for some noble person of long ago, a sort of princess called Rudine Vaxen. But there was little more than that. However, it was known Rudine had been the second daughter of Earl Lichreyl Vaxen. Their family home was set in WixWyn, the small but in many ways fabulous city, far to the west by the ocean coast. Rudine, it was said, had developed a strange illness that caused her to seek solitude. Hence the Earl, feeling sorry for his daughter, had built this large castle in the middle of nowhere for her to live in. When she died, aged only twenty-four, he had her buried back in WixWyn, in the Vaxen family grave, and never used the castle again. Not surprising then, that the place communicates such an air of sadness, thought Rhea. But castles don't talk to people, you know that, she told herself.

Rhea continued to think hard about this. She had a friend called Clarne who was ill, back at the school. The two girls were

best friends, but Clarne had become very unwell two summers before, and now lacked the energy to do very much. Hence she spent most of her time resting or sleeping. Fortunately, Clarne still liked the school and the authorities there had let her stay, but Rhea often felt she was not the happy person she used to be. It struck her then, that the story of Rudine becoming strangely ill might have some similarities with Clarne's situation. Rhea decided she'd look into this Rudine story a bit more when they got back to their academy.

In the meantime, they'd come looking for treasure! As students of the 'Adventure and Treasure Hunting' course at the RiftWood Academy of Historical Science, they were out on a field trip. Supposedly an exciting chance to get away from familiar school surroundings, hunt around for clues, discover secret passages, read maps, draw maps, re-interpret maps, and all these interesting things plus more. But why they'd actually come here, Rhea wasn't really sure. In fact, thinking it through, she hadn't a clue as to why they'd decided to head for this strange place. Back at RiftWood, the castle had just been a lonely dot on an old crinkled map. A dot that had somehow caught the girl's attention. Now they were within that dot's walls.

Brandon appeared at the stone entrance to the staircase.

"Are you all right? You've been stuck up here for ages."

"I was just wondering what we're doing here," said Rhea in a far-off way. "That's all."

"Oh no! Not you as well!" exclaimed Brandon. "I had enough of that from Jade last night!"

- Chapter 2 -
All Too Good to be True

Most of the rest of the day was spent looking around for anything interesting that might be there, waiting to be found by a sharp pair of eyes. But the three friends didn't really have too much luck.

Brandon discovered a small room about three corridors off the main hall that contained a few rusting weapons. A couple of short swords, a dagger, and a beaten-up old shield. At first sight, the shield looked very boring indeed, rusted all over. But looking more carefully, there was definitely some kind of design etched upon it. Something like a pattern of stars, with an odd shape above them, thought Brandon. But he couldn't make it out though. No matter, I'll take it back to the school and study it there, he decided. Then Brandon wondered if Rhea might be able to recognise the symbol. She was clever like that.

Jade spent her time around the towers. After enjoying the fantastic view from the taller one, she climbed up its slightly shorter twin and discovered an oddly shaped room built into the tower side, about three-quarters of the way up. Inside it was empty, but a string of unusual symbols was carved into one of the stone walls. I bet they mean something really important, thought Jade, so she excitedly got out some paper, and started to copy and sketch them down. Finally, she put the paper safely away in a leather flat bag. Perhaps they're the key to some great secret, or part of a clue to uncovering a vast horde of buried treasure, or something equally amazing she hoped.

Rhea found the sad atmosphere of the castle a little oppressive, so she decided to go outside and wander around at

a slight distance. The thick walls were high, the windows all high. Nothing on ground level at all except solid stone. The main gate looked as if it had been torn down and left to rust years before. Probably by robbers or bandits looking for gold or jewels, she guessed. And there were no trees or bushes anywhere in sight, just luscious green grass. How did people live out here she found herself thinking. I mean what did they drink?

Just then Brandon came walking out past the main gate.

"There you are, Rhea. Found any gold coins, or magic amulets, or even a bag of real dragon's teeth!" he shouted across to her while grinning.

Rhea shook her head, a smile crossing her own face.

"What do you think of this then?" asked Brandon, holding up the shield he'd found earlier. "Recognise the symbol?"

"No," she said, as Brandon got nearer and showed it to her, "but I was wondering how people out here would get water. There's not a stream or river anywhere nearby. I mean, we filled up our big flask a day's ride back west, and we've seen nothing since."

Brandon thought about that for a moment.

"Perhaps they had buckets and gutters and what have you to collect rainwater in. It must shower down a lot here, just look at the luscious grass, the horses love it!"

"Where would they keep it then, the rain that is?" asked Rhea.

Brandon studied the castle a bit like Rhea had done.

"How about in that round bit, just off the side of the main castle wall," he answered, pointing it out.

"Could be," said Rhea. "Let's have a look."

Hence the two friends set off back into the hall and headed to the right once inside. At the far corner were a stone archway, a couple of steps that led down, and a room that sort of appeared out of nothing as you stepped into it. Light poured in from three large but highly set windows. They soon discovered why. Set into the floor was a hole. It looked like a very deep hole, very deep indeed. The room was well-lit so people of old would see it and not fall in.

“Well! Well! Well! What have we here?” asked Brandon, smiling.

“Your jokes get worse all the time,” said Rhea in reply. “Anyway, how can you tell it’s a well?”

Brandon glanced about.

“Look, those gaps in the wall could have been where a pipe or gutter came down from the roof and fed rain straight into this hole.”

Rhea nodded. She peered over the edge of the well, staring straight down. The sides disappeared into darkness quite quickly. It looked empty. Brandon dropped a big stone down into its murky depths. They heard no splash. The water must have dried out over many, many years. For some reason, the black circular well entrance then reminded Rhea of the black dot, representing the castle, that lay positioned on the map back at RiftWood. An eerie feeling started to come over her. Rhea swallowed. Gazing into the darkness she felt drawn in some uncanny way to this abyss sunk deep into the ground. It was the same feeling that had made her come out to this castle in the first place, thus bringing her friends with her. So, like a moth being drawn to a flame, Rhea knew what had to be done next. She glanced back at Brandon with a knowing look.

“Surely you don’t plan on going down there!” he exclaimed.

“Why not?” mused Rhea.

“Why not!” exclaimed Brandon again. “What could possibly be down a well, other than all the rotten apple cores and mouldy cabbages people threw down it, a hundred summers ago?”

“No. Think!” retorted Rhea. “If it was a well, they would have made an effort to keep it as clean as possible.”

“Fair point. But what about all the rubbish thrown in by people since? There could be a huge pile of junk at the bottom,” stated Brandon.

“Only one way to find out,” said Rhea quite firmly, “and this is, I remind you, a treasure-hunting trip, and so far, all we have to show for five day’s work is your rusty old shield and the ‘secret runes’ Jade showed me earlier. Not much, is it?”

Brandon sighed. Rhea could be a trifle headstrong when it suited her. He’d noticed that in the past.

“All right. But how do you propose to get down? We do have a climbing sling, but it was hardly meant for this.”

“Well, you and Jade can hold a rope each and lower me in. You could even run the rope over a smooth bit of wood, that way it won’t rip up on the well edge.”

“All very well, but Jade is not very strong. What if we can’t pull you up?” quizzed Brandon.

“You can get a horse to pull me up,” answered Rhea matter-of-factly.

“This is pure madness,” said Brandon, “but if you’re game then so am I.”

“Well I’m game!” stated Rhea.

When Jade Vixoe found out what was being planned, she thought exactly the same as Brandon but wasn't at all game. A small girl only ten years old, she was the youngest of the three.

"Please don't go!" Jade pleaded after much argument.

Rhea started to hear the concern in her voice. She spoke to Jade calmly.

"I know what I'm doing. We'll run a rope through a chain fastened to a horse. If there's any problem, you just tie off the rope and get the horse to pull me up. It'll work, I promise you."

Jade still didn't look too convinced, but a short while later was holding onto a rope, as if her own life depended on it. Rhea was now about five storeys down the well. It wasn't particularly wide, and she could easily stretch out her arms and touch both sides at the same time. Her fingers ran down and over the brickwork. They were good quality bricks too she noticed, not cheap ones.

"Keep lowering," echoed a ghostly voice out of the darkness.

Jade fed more and more rope into the well. Down and down went Rhea into the depths of Mi-Rethyn, a lantern in one hand, a whistle in the other. Any sound on the whistle and the others were to pull her up as fast as possible. Now she must be ten storeys down, but there was still no sign of the bottom. The air was stale but not damp and the walls looked dry. If ever the question 'What am I doing here?' had any meaning, it was now, thought Rhea. She passed layers and layers of brickwork, descending ever deeper into the utter blackness, her own shadow flickering off the circular wall by the lantern's pale yellow light. After what seemed like forever, the bottom appeared out of the abyss below. Some wood, several buckets, and a few other bits of junk were there to greet the young

adventurer. Avoiding these, Rhea's feet hit the ground. It was quite solid. So much for Brandon's talk of piles of thick soft mud, all full of wriggling worms and crawling maggots!

Up top, they noticed the rope had gone limp. Jade rushed to the well entrance and looked down. She could see nothing, nothing at all. Rhea glanced up at the well top. From her position, it was like a tiny faint moon in an otherwise perfectly black and starless sky.

"Are you all right!" Jade shouted down.

"I doubt if she can hear you," said Brandon.

Putting the lantern to the floor, Rhea crouched down. There was, well, not a lot, except what appeared to be a candlestick. Rhea glanced at her lantern. Why would a candlestick be over twenty storeys down a well? It looked like a nice one though. She reached out to pick it up but then noticed another metal object just to the left. Reaching out to grab that one instead, she found herself holding what looked something like a tiara, a sort of ornate headband. But it wasn't a normal object by any means. It felt very dense, very solid, and very cold. Definitely worth keeping, thought the young adventurer, as it was placed into a leather satchel. The candlestick then caught Rhea's eye again. Reaching out to pick it up a second time, she suddenly heard what might have been a faint echo from above.

"Come on, you've been down there ages!" shouted Brandon at the top of his voice.

Distracted, Rhea looked up and shouted back.

"I've nearly finished!"

But she had no idea as to whether anyone heard her or not. The candlestick now lay in shadow, out of view. Rhea stood up and went to pick up her lantern. Her mind seemed clear and

she was ready to think about leaving, but suddenly the lantern's flickering flame reminded her of the candlestick once more.

Rhea now had the strange impression the candlestick didn't want to be picked up. This was odd. She knelt down and reached out her hand a third time, deliberately and carefully. But the same eerie cool sensation she'd felt before, at the top of the well, came over the girl again. Though here it was much stronger. Almost as if the object just out of reach was trying to tell her something. Warning her, yet also beckoning her, at the same time. Rhea froze for a moment. What would happen if she touched it? Should she leave it here in peace, or was its discovery the start of some epic adventure? It didn't take Rhea long to decide what to do. She was a young student treasure hunter, and finding the unexpected was every treasure hunter's dream. Rhea's fingers closed tightly over its metal stem. 'Got you!' she thought. The candlestick really did feel cold and was extremely heavy. She had to struggle with both hands to force the thing into her satchel. Now for the long journey up.

"Alright! Get me out of here!" Rhea shouted.

Nothing happened. Rhea put the whistle she was carrying to her lips and blew it as hard as she could. In the close confines of the well, the sound deafened her!

"Oh no!" cried Jade up top. "Something's gone wrong!"

The little girl ran to her horse, Nester, and got him to walk slowly across the floor, thereby pulling Rhea up the well. Nester was more or less out of the great hall by the time Rhea appeared. She really had gone a long way down. Brandon helped her over the well edge.

"And what did you find?" he asked sarcastically. "Any mouldy turnips?"

With some effort, Rhea pulled the heavy bag off her shoulder and let it drop to the floor. It hit the ground with a crash.

"Crumbs!" said Brandon. "Sounds like a solid gold ingot!"

"No, it's just a candlestick," she gasped while rubbing her shoulder where the heavy bag had been cutting into it.

Brandon looked strangely at Rhea, but got down and loosened the leather satchel. Pulling it open, two objects appeared.

"Giddy galloping horses!" whistled Brandon, his eyes opening wide. "Just a candlestick eh?"

Even Rhea looked on amazed. In daylight, the candlestick possessed a deep dark red colour, with a dazzling metallic lustre that made the best gold look plain cheap. In appearance, the main stem resembled an imperial column, which gracefully branched into three splendid cups, each one shaped like a ship. It was magnificent workmanship! Around the base were markings, in some foreign language which none of the three friends could read. The tiara was fashioned out of similar quality metal but had the colour of deep midnight blue. The same kind of strange markings ran around its outer surface too.

"They're just beautiful," said Jade in awe.

"They're more than beautiful," said Brandon, "they're fantastic! They must be worth, oh, a million silver coins."

"Ten million!" chimed in Jade.

"This'll be school find of the year! We'll win prizes for sure!" continued Brandon.

"But why are they so cold?" said Jade, picking up the tiara.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s just the metal,” said Rhea, holding the candlestick with both hands. “Whatever it is, these must be heavier than pure gold, that’s for sure.”

“There aren’t many things denser than gold I know of,” offered Brandon. “We should head back to our school and show someone. I mean, wait till we throw this lot on old Mr Ashterrie’s desk! Corrr! Won’t he be surprised!”

“He’ll be surprised all right! Throw that on his desk, and it’ll break clean in two!” joked Jade.

The next morning, the three friends carefully packed up their belongings, especially their treasure, and mounted their three horses, Nester, Gallops, and Tamwain. They also led out the two packhorses which had been laden with a dozen days’ worth of food, equipment, a water flask, and other things, and started the four-day journey back west, toward the beautiful Rift Wood and their fine academy.

As they headed away from the old grey castle, each turned around to take a final look. The two towers still looked impressively high, like a couple of giant rock pinnacles, and the starkness of the place still struck the three friends. Five days ago, this castle had just been a lonely dot on a crinkled map, thought Rhea, but now it was a setting of deep mystery and fantastic treasure. All too good to be true! The sort of thing that is only supposed to happen in fairy stories considered Rhea cheerfully. How fortunate they were!

Unknown to the young adventurers, however, two distant pairs of eyes watched them leave the castle grounds, and head out westward. One pair was filled with frustration, fear, and

more than a little hatred. The owner of this pair pulled on the reins of their small horse and began to follow the children at a very safe distance. The other pair of eyes were different though. Very different.

- Chapter 3 -
Red Tea and Ginger Buns

The children's arrival back at the RiftWood Academy of Historical Science, late one afternoon, had been no great event in itself. But the throwing, or rather dropping, of the heaviest candlestick in living memory, onto Mr Ashterrie's beautifully polished walnut table caused quite a stir.

Crash! Crunch!

"What's the meaning of this, Brandon Harfaves, you young fool!" roared Mr Ashterrie.

"I beg your pardon sir, but just look in the bag!" replied Brandon, full of confidence that one glance at the candlestick and Mr Ashterrie was going to forget all about the newly formed dent in his table.

"This had better be good, young man," said Mr Ashterrie as he undid the bag's cords and pulled the thing away from what was within.

As the object came into view he gasped with surprise.

"My goodness me!" said Mr Ashterrie full of admiration. "We have done well, haven't we."

Jade saw Ashterrie's eyes glisten and sparkle as he held up the candlestick with both hands. He just loved objects of value and mystery.

"Cold isn't it?" said the Chief Master of the RiftWood School.

"Did you ever see such a thing Mr Ashterrie?" asked Brandon triumphantly.

"Not recently I must admit. And which bank vault did you steal this out of?" Ashterrie asked, still staring at the object.

"We found it!" said Jade excitedly. "We found it down a well."

"Well, actually, Rhea found it down a well," corrected Brandon.

"Found it? Down a well?" said Mr Ashterrie looking very puzzled. "And how pray did that happen?"

Brandon and Jade then recounted the whole story about the abandoned castle, the two towers, the dry well, Rhea's brave and intrepid trip to the bottom, and so on.

"And she found this too," said Jade, putting the tiara carefully on the polished table, rather than dropping it, as Brandon had done. "It looks just as nice as the candlestick, don't you think sir?"

Ashterrie nodded. Just as nice, he thought. Jade had been wearing it for most of the last three days, despite the fact Brandon kept saying it would turn her into a monster, or make her blind, or something equally horrible.

"And where is Miss Rhea now?" asked Ashterrie.

"I think she's with Clarne," said Brandon.

"Yes. You're probably right there. Yes. Well, you two can run along now and tomorrow you can start writing a report about all this recent treasure hunting. I shall be expecting a particularly good one."

"Yes sir!" said Brandon.

"Yes sir!" chipped in Jade.

The two children promptly left, but the candlestick remained upright on the Chief Master's desk. Its hypnotic dark

red colour could fixate the eye of all who looked upon it. Mr Ashterrie sat down and studied the thing for the longest time.

He often acted like a bit of a clown in front of the children but Palin Larchen Ashterrie was no idiot. He was eighty-one years old and had spent most of his life in the very serious business of treasure hunting. Having graduated with top honours from the Academy of Historical Learning in the great city of Norridon, he'd then spent half a lifetime travelling around the world of Mi-Rethyn. Studying history and hunting for old relics, forgotten treasures, lost fortunes, missing riches, and a good deal more besides had been Mr Ashterrie's favourite pastime. What's more, he had many suspicions as to where a good deal more might be found, if only he had the energy to go and look for it. Which, of course, now he didn't.

However, rather than just sell some of the booty he'd discovered, live in a big house and ride a posh carriage around town all day and get thoroughly bored with life, he had, since his sixty-second birthday, taken the senior position, that is become the Chief Master, at the RiftWood School. He saw it as his solemn duty to inspire the next generation, or two, with the same awe and wonder that he'd gained from the Norridon school far to the south.

Money from selling some of the relics in his possession had been used to extend RiftWood. Also, should things get financially a bit tight in the future, then there were, he was sure, a few more priceless treasures heaped up in certain old boxes down in some dusty corner of the school vault, that would get them out of trouble. Thus Mr Ashterrie was a rare breed indeed, and a jolly good teacher to boot.

The RiftWood Academy was of the boarding kind with children usually staying for whole seasons at a time. There was no formal school year, hence if children were present they got taught, and if they were not present then they didn't. Quite simple really. Some youngsters would just come for a season or two, while others attended for years and years. It seemed a bit unorganised at times, but in reality, things went fairly well.

Still staring at the candlestick, Ashterrie heard a knock on his door. Deciding that having everybody else in the school see this thing was probably not a good idea, he picked it up, having to use both hands, and put it down in a wooden chest on the floor, before letting the lid fall shut.

"Enter," he then declared in a commanding tone of voice.

One of the housekeepers walked in, a fairly elderly lady by the name of Mrs Habbit. She was a bit strict for Ashterrie's liking, but still a very efficient woman.

"Here's the bill for that little escapade by your students, Mr Ashterrie," she said matter of factly. "I hope it was worth it. I mean, did they do anything other than play pranks on each other, and tell silly jokes, for nine days straight?"

"Oh, I think we can say it was worthwhile," said Ashterrie, his eyes darting to the wooden box at the foot of his table. "Yes. I'm sure it was very educational for them."

"I hope so," said Mrs Habbit, "and you should get someone to re-polish that table. If I didn't know better, I'd say someone tried to smash it with a hammer!"

"Ah yes. I have just the person in mind to do that," smiled Ashterrie.

Brandon Harfaves did not get an early night that night. Some nonsense about a table, a candlestick, and a large tin of polish, was all his friends could get out of him the next morning when they asked why he kept falling asleep over his breakfast.

A cool wind blew hard across the bleak and desolate red landscape, whipping Rhea's hair first one way and then the other. She could hear the rustling sound it made as it whistled through the trees growing in rows behind her. Then there were these gusts of wild air that seemed to blow around her person, in mad dashing circles, before they raced away over the truly vast expanse of land that lay ahead.

Rhea pulled her hair out of her eyes and gazed at the eerie scene around. Several very unusual-looking plants were growing up, and over, a nearby outcrop of dark red rock. Their tangled roots made it look as if they spent all their time hanging on for dear life, lest the wind blew them clean away. And the sky! The sky was a deep orange colour, almost red but not quite. Immense-looking clouds moved slowly across this great high expanse, but no sun shone. Light just seemed to pour through the glowing orange cavern above her.

The girl looked down at herself. She seemed to be who she always was. Same hands. Same feet. Same clothes as she'd been wearing before going to bed. She put her hands together. They felt solid enough. Next, the girl tried to think. She found she knew who she was. Her name was Rhea Cantonell. She had recently turned twelve years old and was a student at the RiftWood School she loved so much. But where could this be, she wondered, as the wind continued to blow on unceasingly.

Rhea stepped forward and found she could walk quite easily. Also, the landscape before her started to make more sense now. Standing on a flat plateau of rock that was obviously very high up, a sheer drop of hundreds upon hundreds of storeys, not far away, was the reason she could see such a vast expanse of land ahead. Below were huge valleys, giant mountain ranges, and vast slowly flowing rivers, all having the same red hue as everything else. What am I doing here, Rhea wondered again. It was her mind's favourite question. One it kept asking her almost anywhere she went.

"What indeed?" said a voice from behind her.

Rhea whirled around to see who'd spoken. At least her reactions were as fast as ever in this strange place she realised. The voice had emanated from an oldish-looking man who sat on a stool, at a simple table. He wasn't there a moment ago, thought Rhea. Whoever he was though, he was dressed casually, wearing a brown tunic with a red sash across his chest.

"Why not join me?" suggested the old man, a hint of a smile upon his face. "There seems to be a spare stool, and tea and cakes for two, if I'm not mistaken."

Rhea knew full well there hadn't been a spare stool, or any tea or cakes in sight just over a moment ago, when she'd first caught a glance of the table. However, thinking about it, she couldn't remember seeing them appear out of thin air or anything like that. There were also red metal plates and glasses.

"Where is this?" asked Rhea.

The oldish man looked around.

"This," he said, spreading out his hands, "is the world of Hennabree. It's a bit strange I must admit, but there it is."

Strange was hardly the word, thought Rhea, as several huge flying creatures passed far below her, their gigantic wings sweeping effortlessly through the air. The old man had taken one of the cakes and was cutting it open with a clear crystal knife. A knife that also seemed to have come out of nothing, thought Rhea.

By this point, a tinge of fear had started to chill its way through the young girl. She was normally quite feisty, and up for a challenge or a new experience, but this was all too strange. All too real as well. Soon she was beginning to feel scared and alone. How was she supposed to get away from this place?

“You’re quite safe,” said the old man reassuringly, while spreading butter on a fruit bun with the clear knife he was holding. “You’re in a dream. If anything happens you really don’t like, then you’ll just wake up in a fright, safe in your bed at RiftWood. Nothing worse than that.”

The old man’s words comforted her and she plucked up the courage to wander over to the table. He seemed harmless enough, but Rhea suspected the old man was anything but harmless. You’re in a dream. Rhea considered the old man’s words again. Maybe he was right. This just had to be a dream, thought Rhea. Rather a vivid one though. Hence, feeling a little better, she sat down on the other stool, reached out her hand, and took a cake.

“The dark ones are ginger, the others fruit,” said the old man, apparently enjoying his fruit bun.

Rhea bit into the dark one in her left hand. It tasted of fresh ginger. The tea was good as well. But this had to be the strangest tea and cake snack imaginable.

“What did you think of that candlestick then?” asked the old man, without even looking at her.

Rhea nearly choked on her tea.

“You know about the candlestick!” she spluttered.

“I watched you leave with it from that old castle the other day. I can see everything in your world if I choose to, so it was easy to follow you and the candlestick back to your school.”

“You can see everything?” asked Rhea slowly in a measured tone.

The old man nodded, pouring himself another cup of tea. Come on girl, she told herself, start thinking! Rhea soon became aware that her mind felt really sharp. This might be a dream but I feel more awake now than I ever do normally, she thought. Time to ask an interesting question.

“Are you a god then?”

“Oh yes,” said the old man, sipping his tea out of a red crystal glass.

“What are you doing here then?” asked Rhea, realising instantly she’d asked her own favourite question, yet again.

“I know what I’m doing here,” said the old man, who was now chewing on a ginger cake. “The real question is do you?”

What was this, Rhea wondered? Some kind of riddle game? She then recalled that in many of the old legends spoken of at the RiftWood School, various gods often asked the people who found them strange and wonderful riddles. She also remembered that nasty things usually happened to the same people if they got the riddles wrong. I’m so glad this is only a dream, she thought. Rhea’s mind now went into overdrive. What was she doing here? Or maybe the question was a trick and the real question was ‘What was the old man doing here?’.

All kinds of strange and witty answers came into her head. But none seemed suitable. Finally, the advice her mother had always drummed into her came into focus. When in a fix, just tell the plain truth. What had she to lose in this situation?

“I don’t know why I’m here, and I don’t know why you’re here either,” stated Rhea.

The old man smiled. He liked this Rhea. She could think when she tried.

“Your mother always was a wise woman,” he said.

Rhea was taken aback. Did this god know everything as well as see everything? But Rhea’s quick mind was working hard. If this is a dream, then this whole world is in your head, as is the old man, so obviously, he would know everything you do and has seen everything you’ve seen. He’s just a figment of your imagination, playing tricks on you.

“I don’t think you’re a god at all,” said Rhea matter-of-factly, “I think this really is a dream, and you’re just a part of it.”

The old man put his glass of tea down.

“Ask me a question. I promise to tell the truth.”

Rhea’s mind was now whirling around like a spinning wheel. What question? She could ask any question she liked. Was this a riddle as well? All kinds of questions were soon speeding through her head. In the end, though, she decided to call the old man’s bluff.

“All right. Here’s my question. What are you really doing here?” asked Rhea. “And don’t answer back with a riddle this time!”

“I promised to tell the truth, didn’t I?” said the old man, looking down at the table.

“You did,” said Rhea, nodding.

“Very well. I’m building an empire.”

The answer caught Rhea off guard.

“I’ve never heard of a god who had to build an empire,” she stated.

“Haven’t you?” asked the old man.

“No. All the gods I’ve ever heard of, sit up in the sky somewhere and spend all their time making trouble for normal people whenever they can. Anyway, empires are nasty things that conquer other people and turn them into slaves. Why would you want to build one of those?”

“Ah, but this is not an ordinary empire,” said the old man with a twinkle in his eye.

“How come?” asked Rhea. “What’s different about it?”

“It’s different because I’m not an ordinary god,” said the old man.

That certainly figured, thought Rhea.

“What kind of god are you then?”

The old man turned to look directly into Rhea’s eyes.

“One who’s interested in you, and the rather large mystery you’re starting to walk into,” was his reply.

Now a chill of fear really did run through Rhea. She sensed this being had a depth to him that was hard to fathom. If he really was out to build an empire, then what kind of nightmare might be coming upon the world of Mi-Rethyn? Perhaps this desolate red world she was in, had been a nice place once, before the old man’s empire had taken it over. The idea of Mi-Rethyn ending up the same way didn’t bear thinking about. Good job this is a dream and none of it’s real.

“You have to go now,” said the old man.

“Oh. Can’t I have another ginger bun?” asked Rhea, realising it was a silly request to ask a living god.

“Perhaps next time,” said the old man.

And with that, he vanished. As did the table, the stools, the cakes, including the ginger ones, the tea, and the landscape. Only the deep red remained.

WATER

**- Chapter 4 -
Peaceful Gardens and Racing Horses**

Rhea woke up suddenly, as rays of bright sunlight streamed through a gap in the slatted curtains of her room and poured straight onto her face. She shut her eyes instantly as soon as she opened them! Everything appeared red to her, as it does when you look through closed eyes directly into bright sunshine. Her mind felt hazy and slow, which was unusual. Often she was wide awake in moments after a good night's sleep.

“Come on brain, get going,” she said to herself.

Gradually she remembered bits of some dream she'd been having. The pictures were hard to recall, but there had definitely been something about red cakes and red tea and strange riddles. It was probably just a load of nonsense like most dreams, she thought, shaking her head as she got out of bed. She didn't have time to think about stuff like that. There was serious work to do, and a serious mystery to solve.

The rarefied atmosphere of the RiftWood school library made it the perfect place to uncover the secrets of the world. Of course, you wouldn't be the only one there trying to discover more about the unknown, so to enable students to work effectively, everybody had to speak in hushed tones. However, the sound of constant whispering just gave the library an even deeper atmosphere of mystery and intrigue than it would otherwise have. So much so, that if you ever stopped working for a moment, and listened to all these whispers around you,

then that would encourage you all the more in your own quest to solve the problems that faced you.

“These books sure are dusty,” said Menonn, in a whisper to himself as he took more volumes off the shelves. “I bet no one's looked at them in years.”

Menonn put his three new books on top of a stack of six that were already on one of the library tables. The table was covered with stacks of books. The chairs around the table were also full of books, and several stacks had started growing up from the floor like hardy fast growing weeds. Then there were the parchments, the old maps, the new maps, the lists, the family trees, the heraldry posters, and much, much more, all out in abundance. Jade was busy pouring over a language table of all the currently spoken and written forms of speech on Mi-Rethyn today. Her copy of the runes carved into the wall of the strange room, set in the old castle tower, lay fully open, and she was trying to match its odd-looking symbols with something a little more familiar.

“This is what you want Jade,” said Menonn quietly. “Look, a book with hundreds of old forms of writing in it. Must be something in here that matches up surely.”

“I hope so. I'm not having much luck at the moment,” replied Jade. “Why don't you try some of the battle languages. They look like the best bet so far. I'll carry on looking in here for now.”

Menonn flicked through the dusty book to the relevant section and started to analyse the tables of alphabets in front of him. He'd been completely fascinated by Jade's account of their castle adventure, and wished now he'd gone himself, rather than spend eight days catching up on various missed classes.

However, Menonn could not have gone even if he had no missed classes to catch up on. He'd been left with a crippled left leg after a very bad carriage accident about three summers ago. It had been a bitter blow to the young boy, who was aged only nine at the time, but at least he could now get about with the aid of a cane. Another child in the carriage had died outright.

Hence, after a year or so of feeling really depressed about everything, Menonn then decided to try and make the most of his life, and as far as he was concerned, coming to the RiftWood School was the best thing that had ever happened to him. It was certainly his current favourite place in all the world.

So despite not having gone to the old sad castle himself, he was now with the other three children wholeheartedly and having copied Jade's original text, he started a spot of language matching himself. Menonn flipped through more pages.

"Old Battle Languages and Codes. Ah, here we are," he whispered to himself as he got down to work.

Brandon, who'd woken up fully by now from having spent half the night polishing Mr Ashterrie's walnut table, was pouring over a large map of the heavens which he'd spread across two entire library desks. Earlier, he'd come to the conclusion the symbol at the top of the rusty old shield, recovered from the lonely castle, was an anvil. The sort of thing blacksmiths used to bash out horseshoes and other metal objects. Also, he was now pretty sure the remaining design on his shield was some part of a star constellation. But identifying it was proving a little difficult, hence all this gazing at star maps. Not one to give up easily however, he kept looking. I need three stars in a triangle, and one a bit off as well, Brandon kept thinking over and over again.

Rhea had earlier that day given a fuller account of their trip to the old castle to Mr Ashterrie, who listened most carefully to every word she said. He considered Rhea one of his best current pupils. The girl was a bit strange sometimes but the best treasure hunters always were. Just look at yourself, he thought humorously. After some questions and discussion, it was agreed he would look into the candlestick while Rhea did some research on the old castle and the Vaxen family who built it.

For the moment though, Rhea had gone out horse riding for the afternoon. She'd spent enough time in the library already that day and wanted to clear her mind. Working on the floor above where the others were based, her table was covered with books about the Vaxens, and she was hunting in particular for information about this Rudine, who'd lived in the lonely old castle so many years ago.

For all the children, this castle trip had already turned into the biggest mystery they'd come across that year.

Mr Ashterrie closed his office door, and taking the candlestick out of its wooden box, he placed it back on his desk again, right in the middle. This was clearly no small trinket, but a serious artefact. But was it magical? The question was asked by all the children, several times over. Well, Ashterrie knew certain objects could be endowed with either a blessing or much more often, a curse. Any of the dark schools of magic would tell you how to do that sort of thing. Also, Ashterrie knew there were definitely several cursed objects floating around the world, and none of them did their owners, or the people who made them, any good at all.

What about this red candlestick though? Someone would have to work out the nature of the markings around its base to answer that question. Brandon had already reckoned they would never be able to crack them, or discover how to decode them, into anything meaningful. Looking at the markings, you felt they were written in a language or code that was only used on very important occasions. The three ships that made up the candle cups must also have some meaning, Ashterrie was sure.

However, the greatest current mystery was as to what the thing was made of. It was heavier than any common metal, much heavier. A dunk into a large beaker full of water, a measurement of its weight on some simple kitchen scales, and a quick calculation afterwards showed this thing was about two and a half times as dense as solid gold.

Ashterrie shook his head and thought hard. There were ancient stories of super-precious metals more valuable than gold, but none of super-heavy metals that he could remember. Well, perhaps his memory was going a little in old age, but a bit of research would put that right. Thus Mr Ashterrie, Chief Master of the RiftWood Academy, got out his own personal keys to the school vault, from an empty bottle he kept in a large box full of other identical empty bottles, and headed off to see what secrets he could unearth.

Sitting out in the School Master's personal garden, Clarne Blenquin was trying to enjoy the mid-spring afternoon sunshine. She liked to come here, at least for a short while each day, whenever the weather allowed her to. In this place of quiet solitude, you were cut off from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the school by tall rich leafed hedgerows and wide colourful

flowerbeds. The whole area somehow held a deep atmosphere of serenity that suited Clarne's nature. In addition, several free-standing imperial columns carved out of pure marble, gave the place a feel of importance, just like a royal palace garden, thought Clarne.

Normally young students were not allowed, under any circumstances whatsoever, to set foot in this hallowed place. However, Clarne's parents were very wealthy and paid the school good money to look after their sick daughter. Thus if the garden wasn't being used to entertain visitors or the parents and guardians of prospective new students, then she was more than welcome to use it.

A clump of bright blue jeshrins on the eastern flowerbed was fully out, trying to absorb as much of the sun's energy as possible. Since she was sitting right next to them, Clarne could easily watch the red and yellow bee who was busy working his way from one triangular-shaped flower to another. It must be nice to be a bee, she thought, and be able to spend all day visiting flowers and gardens and not have a care in the world.

Moments later, a kitchen girl appeared at the garden entrance, and carefully carried a silver tray across the short grass toward Clarne.

"Your afternoon tea, Miss," said the girl cheerfully.

"Thanks, Salice," said Clarne softly, a smile on her face.

Salice put the tray down and sat on the lush grass.

"It's a lovely day, really nice, don't you think?" piped Salice.

"Truly wonderful," answered Clarne looking again at the hovering bee.

"I hear your friends have been having some fine adventures, or so I was told," said the kitchen girl.

“So it would appear,” responded Clarne. “Rhea told me all about their trip as soon as she got back the other day. They certainly had an exciting time.”

Salice poured out the tea. To help keep Clarne’s strength up, Salice added a spoon of dark refined syrup into her deep blue china cup.

“What business are my friends up to now?” enquired Clarne.

“Oh, they’re in the library I think, apart from Rhea though, who I’m sure went out riding. You should try some riding every now and then. I’m sure you’re strong enough these days.”

“I don’t think so! I’d just come flying off and break a leg or something!” retorted Clarne sarcastically.

“You were really good once,” said Salice, handing Clarne’s china cup and saucer to her.

“Once, yes, but I’ve probably forgotten how to stay on a horse now,” said Clarne with a hint of sad resignation in her voice.

“You would soon pick it up again, I bet,” responded Salice.

“Perhaps,” said Clarne absent-mindedly.

“Anything else I can get you?”

“You can take these back,” said Clarne, pointing at two books on the lawn.

Salice picked them up.

“An Atlas of Lost Lands’ and ‘Maps of Previous Ages’,” she read out. “Going on a journey?”

“Wish I was. I’m just checking a few things for Rhea.”

“Doing her work for her now eh?” mused Salice.

The conversation dropped off, and the two girls sat and enjoyed the peaceful atmosphere of the garden for a few

moments. More bees appeared and you could hear them humming as they darted over the flowers.

“Is Rhea all right?” asked Salice, breaking the silence.

“As far as I know. Why?” asked Clarne with real interest.

“I don’t know. She just seems a bit different somehow,” said Salice looking right at Clarne. “Ever since that trip away, she seems, how can I put it, more serious or something.”

“Rhea is Rhea! You should know that,” replied Clarne.

“That’s certainly true!” said Salice, picking up the books and the empty tray. “I better get back to work then. I’ll call by, in a bit.”

Salice wandered out of the garden, and back to the kitchen complex. She was a nice girl who worked as part of the domestic staff and often kept Clarne up to date with all the latest gossip, which was usually gossip about Mrs Habbit. Clarne then told her other friends, and that helped them stay one step ahead of the domestic housekeeper, which they all loved doing!

Salice herself had started working at the school some two winters ago. She was the daughter of a local farmer, in the nearby village of Loxrift, and had been rather quiet and shy at first. Which was not surprising when you had to spend most of your time scrubbing pots in the kitchen under the eagle eye of Mrs Habbit. However, when Clarne had become very seriously ill over that first winter, Salice was assigned some simple duties to help out in the situation, and therefore soon got to know both Clarne and Rhea quite well. Salice found them to be really nice friends, and they both took to her at once, so from then on, being at the school was more fun.

However, for Rhea and Clarne that winter was the darkest ever. As Clarne's illness took its toll, the girl became weaker and weaker. So with her best friend on the verge of death, and not expected to make it into the spring, Rhea became so distraught and unwell, that she was forced to leave the academy to return home to her parents for two whole moon cycles. Before going she made Salice promise to keep a good eye on Clarne and not let anything, or anyone, trouble her. Not that Salice needed telling, but she was pleased Rhea had asked her especially. Hence Salice, along with Mrs Jantill, the school's chief medic, had been the ones who nursed Clarne through the worst phase of her sickness. Somehow, and no one knew quite why, Clarne did survive into the spring, but had been left extremely weak ever since. Therefore thoughts of a life spent adventuring around the world of Mi-Rethyn, hunting for treasure, were currently out of the question, but Clarne loved the RiftWood School and so had remained.

Thinking about what Salice had said, concerning Rhea being different after her trip away, made Clarne wonder. Hopefully, it was just a case of Rhea having done too much work over the last day or so. However, the quiet atmosphere of the garden soon calmed Clarne's mind, and presently she was happily watching the bees working again, without a care in the world.

Gallops raced across the Rift Meadow as if all the sabre-toothed tigers of Hell, and all the wraith-cats of the Abyss, were chasing after him with iron teeth bared and forked tongues hissing, ready to gobble him up alive! The fast drumming rhythm of thudding hoofs filled Rhea's ears. And the

wind, which whistled through her shoulder-length blond hair, also caused her cape to stretch out behind them, like a huge lilac sail, in a gale-force storm.

She imagined herself to be in some great horse race, where riders had come from all over the world, to challenge one another in the race to end all races and attempt to win some fabulous prize of infinite worth. As the edge of the meadow reared up upon them, she suddenly steered Gallops at the last possible moment along the boundary of the wood, and they both thundered down the slope toward the river. Tree branches flashed past only a hand's breadth from her unprotected head, and they were at near suicidal velocity as Gallops ploughed right into the shallow river Rene. Throwing up sheets and sheets of water, he zoomed up the other bank like an enraged dragon gone completely berserk!

A few strides later, Rhea decided to pull in gently on the reins and they gradually slowed to a complete standstill. Gallops huffed and puffed and huffed as Rhea got off his back and patted him on the side.

"Good boy!" she said to the horse. "I bet you enjoyed that."

Rhea glanced around and then led Gallops back to the river for a drink. Things had been getting to her recently and she always went a bit crazy when that happened. If the school knew what they'd just done, then there would be trouble for sure.

"But no one will know, will they Gallops?" she said, looking at him lovingly.

The horse whinnied in apparent agreement. Gallops liked Rhea and would only race this fast with her on his back. He was one of the school horses since Rhea didn't own her own, but most students would usually get to know one horse in

particular, and Gallops was definitely her favourite. The horse enjoyed his drink as the river Rene flowed gently over the broad pebble pass that connected the beautiful Rift Meadow with the more scraggy Tangle-Twitch Fen, so-called because loads of tangle weed bushes grew along its western side. Soon Gallops wandered off a few paces to chew at some grass, leaving Rhea alone to gaze into the river. She watched as small swirls of water, like miniature whirlpools, flowed gently past, one after the other. It was a very relaxing spot where you could really get away from it all.

However, unbidden and uninvited, an image of the heavy red metal candlestick crawled into her mind. The three prongs, the three ships, the imperial column. All were so clear, that she felt almost able to reach a hand into her head and pick it up. What are you all about, she found herself asking for the hundredth time that day. Even here she couldn't get away from this strange artefact. Somehow it now seemed resident in her head. Give it a few days, and things will be back to normal, she tried to tell herself, not quite sure whether she believed this or not.

The sun went in suddenly. Rhea looked up and saw grey clouds now filled over one-half of the sky. Waterdrops began to fall. Time to be going.

"Come on Gallops," she said, climbing back into the light saddle he was wearing, "we'll just trot back, even if we get drenched."

So later that afternoon, a soaking wet horse, and an equally soaking wet young girl wandered into the school stable yard, as warm rain lashed down from the sky in torrents.

"Are you mad?" shouted one of the stable hands, a chap everybody called Brickly.

"Oh very," said Rhea in a matter-of-fact voice.

Salice noticed Rhea wander past one of the kitchen windows a few moments later. The girl was nuts, she thought, a complete fruitcake. But concern soon spread over Salice's face. I do hope she's all right.

- Chapter 5 - Strange Visitors and Rolling Barrels

It was early the next morning when the dark rider came to the school. The air was cold and the ground still wet with dew, and although a blue sky promised a nice day, it would be mid-morning before the temperature was anything like comfortable.

Demos, one of the domestic workers, was already up and waiting, a little inside the main school entrance gate, for an early morning cart, full of supplies from one of the local farms. It would be laden down with milk, eggs, bread, possibly some fruit and various other things. Hopefully, a few sausages too, thought Demos. He fancied a few pork sausages for breakfast that morning. Being a short middle-aged man, who amongst other things, worked in the school stable and looked after the horses, he was busy filing down some newly made horseshoes.

Years before, Demos had served as a soldier in the Shire Army of Wixingdale. He was not so much a soldier who went to war every other year and fought in great ferocious battles, but rather the kind who tried to keep the peace at home, and occasionally got into a scrap with smugglers and highwaymen and what have you. Nevertheless, he had been well trained in the use of many weapons, and often gave young students some hints during school weapons practice sessions.

A horse whinny caused Demos to look toward the bend in the road that led into the RiftWood academy. Expecting to see a lumbering old cart, driven by his old friend Flance, and pulled by two even older-looking horses, he was more than a little surprised when this imposing black horse and dark rider came

wandering slowly out of the trees. The deliberately slow pace of this horse soon gave Demos the feel that something very menacing was approaching. He watched anxiously as the rider came closer and closer. Knowing a thing or two about horses, he could see this one was no cheap mount, more like a war charger, he thought. Pausing at the outer gate to read the RiftWood Academy name sign, the rider turned the horse in and headed down toward the school buildings. Whoever the rider was though, a thick black furry helm covered most of their face, making it difficult to see the person underneath.

Demos however had seen quite enough. He ran back ahead of the black horse, which was still moving slowly down the drive, and dived almost headfirst into the school kitchen complex. Next, he was yelling about there being serious trouble outside, and that some of the young men should grab some swords or hammers and join him, ready for a scrap!

So, by the time the rider reached the main school entrance, Demos and three other young men, who all looked at each other a bit nervously, stood gripping their drawn swords and waiting for the worst. Two others then stepped out of the school front door, also with weapons drawn, so with the odds now set at six against one, they all felt a bit better.

“What’s your business?” asked Demos in a stern voice.

“I’m here to see Mr Ashterrie,” replied the rider looking straight at him, his voice sounding as cool as a cucumber.

“Oh yes, and is he expecting you?” asked Demos.

“Not really,” said the rider scanning the six armed men before him.

“Well, he won’t be up for some while yet so you can come back later,” stated Demos as bravely as he could.

The other young men murmured their agreement at what was just said.

“Then perhaps I may be so bold as to ask if I may join you for breakfast,” said the dark rider calmly. “I believe it is just arriving!”

A cart pulled by two old horses then rumbled through the school gate and headed down to where the men and rider were having their stand-off. Demos, recognising his friend, went up to the old farmer sitting on the cart, who then pulled in the reins of his horses, thus causing them to stop.

“Having some trouble?” asked Flance Tibbert to Demos.

“I don’t know,” moaned Demos. “This stranger just turns up out of nowhere, and now he’s saying he’s here to see one of the teachers.”

“Maybe he is. He was in Loxrift yesterday, I can tell you that. Didn’t see no trouble either,” said Flance.

“Hmmm. Alright, maybe I’ll let him in, and then get the lads to help you unload,” agreed Demos. “Give me a moment though.”

Demos walked back over to the black horse. Gosh, this was a big stallion! He could probably kick the whole school down with his bare hooves, Demos thought. He then addressed the dark rider in as steady a voice as he could muster.

“You can stay for now, but we don’t allow any weapons in the school. You leave any you got with your horse, that clear?”

“Of course,” smiled the rider who now removed his helm. “I still remember the school rules, you know. I used to study here!”

The drawn swords started to fall as the tension eased away. The rider dismounted and handed his reins to one of the young men, who then began to lead the big horse toward the stables.

“He’ll probably eat all the hay and oats we’ve got,” the stable lad moaned.

Three others took charge of the supply cart, while the rider, Demos, and Flance, stepped together into the kitchen complex and headed for the currently empty dining hall. All the kitchen girls watched the dark rider pass and started asking questions about who he might be and where he may have come from. Once he was sitting down with some hot coffee, the rider introduced himself.

“The name is Naylen, Naylen Shaw. I was here eleven years ago, as a pupil, but have never been back since, though I’ve often thought about dropping in from time to time,” said Naylen smiling. “Yourselves?”

“Demos,” said Demos.

“Flance,” said Flance, offering his hand.

Soon the three men were engrossed in conversation and talked happily right through breakfast. Demos particularly enjoyed his pork sausages that morning.

Crash! Crash! Crash!

“Oh dear!” said Brandon, standing on the back of the supply cart and looking in sheer disbelief at the three large barrels, laden with milk, that had just fallen off the back, and were now rumbling down the incline.

“You idiot! You’ve cut the rope!” shouted the young man called Brickly.

“No, I didn’t! It was loose!” shouted Brandon in return.

“Well don’t just stand there like a melon, go and stop ‘em!” yelled Brickly in reply.

The barrels rolled past the edge of a storage area and headed toward the kitchen, picking up speed.

“Run!” shouted Brickly. “Run!”

The high-pitched yelling and shouting soon reached the kitchen.

“Now what’s going on?” asked Mrs Habbit. “First Demos comes running in, yelling about pirates and robbers, and now what are they up to? Go and look Salice.”

Salice headed for the kitchen door, opened it, and was about to step outside, when at the last possible moment she stopped herself, as the first large barrel rolled past.

“Oh my giddy aunt!” shouted Mrs Habbit, as the other two barrels followed in pursuit. “Can’t those men do anything right?”

Brandon ran past the kitchen door and caught up with the third barrel. He tried to kick it with his foot to make it change direction, but instead, he tripped over and went sprawling across the driveway, cutting his head.

Now just the previous day, Mrs Habbit had arranged some nice flowerpots along the outside wall of the dining hall. The first barrel promptly smashed them all to pieces. The second smashed those pieces into even smaller pieces, while the third barrel ground what was left into bits so small, you could no longer tell them apart from the actual gravel of the driveway!

Luckily the first barrel then hit a boulder in its path, spun around at an angle and rolled onto some grass. Unluckily the other two missed the boulder and carried straight on. Brandon had gotten up by now and was running hard toward the

remaining two barrels. The front one reached the three large steps, at the end of the drive, that led down into the vegetable patch.

Bump! Bump! Bump!

“Oh heck!” said Brandon, as the flimsy gate to the vegetable garden was ripped off its hinges and flattened in an instant.

The heavy barrel then knocked over a wheelbarrow full of turnips and rolled right over the cabbage patch, before it finally crashed into a compost heap and stopped.

Bump! Bump! Bump!

Brandon didn’t bother saying anything this time. He just bit his lip in horror as the last barrel first squashed an unfortunate marrow, and then headed straight for the tool shed at the bottom of the garden. For Brandon, it was now like watching the whole world about to end before his very eyes. All too quickly a deafening crash of splintering wood and shattering glass filled the air for several moments before an eerie and prolonged silence settled over the devastated scene.

Salice, Mrs Habbit, Brandon, Naylen, Demos, Flance and Brickly all stood at the entrance to the vegetable garden, looking at the pile of matchwood that had once been the tool shed. Salice, Mrs Habbit, Demos, Flance and Brickly then all looked at Brandon. Brandon took one look at them and then looked at the ground.

“Well it’s good to see that nothing much has really changed at RiftWood!” said Naylen, smiling.

“I’ll knock your block off one day, Brandon Harfaves, I really will!” scolded Mrs Habbit.

She was fuming and there was nothing Brandon could do about it. He was sitting on a wooden chair, in the kitchen, while Salice dabbed his head with a tea cloth and some cold water.

“You seem to think this school is just some kind of playground, don’t you? Well, I’ve come across your sort before, Brandon Harfaves, and you mark my words, you’ll come to a sorry end one day, a very sorry end indeed!”

Mrs Habbit then stormed off, out of the kitchen, to see the Chief School Master about the events that had just taken place. Brandon was left thinking the day of his sorry end had already come.

“How does that feel?” asked Salice, dabbing more cold water on his bleeding temple.

Brandon put his hand on his head as blood still flowed from the wound.

“I was only trying to help,” moaned the boy, who was feeling sorrier for himself with each passing moment. “The rope really was loose.”

Naylen looked in at the kitchen door.

“Are you alright, young man?” he asked, smiling.

“Yes sir,” replied Brandon.

“That was quite something I must say,” said Naylen, grinning freely. “I’ve only been here a short while, but I’m glad to see young men like you are still doing the school proud!”

Brandon smiled for the first time that morning but then thought about what was to come and promptly stopped smiling again.

“I’m a dead duck once the School Master finds out though, I really am,” groaned Brandon to Naylen.

“Leave that to me. After all, it wasn’t your fault,” said Naylen, with a sly look on his face.

Brandon watched him go.

“Who was that?” he asked.

“Don’t know,” said Salice, “but he was here earlier, and scared the living daylights out of Demos and the others. I think he’s an ex-pupil.”

“Well whoever he is, it’s still a terrible start to my day,” moaned Brandon. “Why do things always go wrong for me?”

Salice put more cold water on Brandon’s head, and he moaned again.

The heated argument between Garden Master Mr Cleops, Domestic Housekeeper Mrs Habbit, Chief Master Mr Ashterrie, and Ex-Pupil Naylen Shaw went on for quite some time. Eventually, it was agreed, although somewhat reluctantly by certain parties, that the incident with the barrels had been an accident, and not due to some tom-foolery on Brandon’s part. So Brandon didn’t get into the trouble he feared.

Naylen then helped to roll the barrels back up to the store, where they belonged and commented on how well they’d survived their little adventure. Flance told him they were ex-naval barrels, built to withstand being knocked about for days on end, while on ships out in high seas.

Mr Cleops was given some funds from the school accounts to get another tool shed built, and also to buy some new flowerpots.

“I’ll keep them inside the school this time,” said Mrs Habbit angrily.

Brickly and Demos then did what they could to clear up the vegetable garden.

“It’s a shame about these cabbages,” said Brickly. “They’re all ruined.”

“Good job an’ all,” said Demos. “I hate cabbage.”

WRITE

- Chapter 6 -

Dangerous Objects and a Changing World

After the excitement of the morning's events had calmed down a bit, Naylen Shaw and Mr Ashterrie finally had the chance to sit down and talk in Ashterrie's Chief Master's office.

"It's certainly been a long time, young Naylen," said Ashterrie. "Too long I think, but it's still good to see you."

"Likewise," said Naylen, "and I must say, you do look healthy. This school is definitely treating you well."

"Most of the time," nodded Mr Ashterrie, "though mornings like today's do make me wonder why I remain here."

The two men paused, as men often do when they are about to talk of important things. Naylen looked around the office. He recognised most of the furnishings, though the huge landscape picture of the Rift Wood trees, positioned on the far wall, hadn't been there before. Had it really been eleven years since he last sat in here? It was a chilling thought to think so much time could pass so quickly.

"I know I should have come back sooner, but you know how it is," responded Naylen. "You, first of all, hear half a whisper about something or other that doesn't make any sense, and then you find half a dozen clues that don't really add up, and before you know it, you're off on some mad treasure hunting escapade! And then, just when you think you've finished that adventure, you find some more clues, or hear about some old legend from the past that everybody else has forgotten about, and off you go hunting again! So in no time at all, you're halfway around the world, and right up to your neck in trouble!"

Mr Ashterrie knew exactly 'how it is'. He too had travelled halfway around the world on little more than a whim or a whim, and on many an occasion, had managed to get right up to his own neck in no end of trouble.

"So, why did you decide to come back at this time?" asked Mr Ashterrie, drumming his fingers on the side arm of his chair.

"Two reasons," answered Naylen. "First, I really do miss this place and honestly wanted to see it all again. The Rift Wood has an atmosphere I've never found anywhere else."

Ashterrie nodded. That was true. Somehow the Rift Wood was unique. You noticed it, particularly, when the wind blew through the trees, causing their leaves to rustle. Sometimes you wondered if the trees were in fact whispering to each other about you, behind your back, as you walked among them.

"And the other reason?" asked the Chief Master, knowing this would be the real reason for Naylen's return.

Naylen looked around and then leaned forward.

"This may sound completely mad," he said in a low voice, "but I have this strange feeling that something odd is going on. Something very odd."

"Odd in what way?" asked Ashterrie, puzzled.

Naylen paused for a moment.

"It's hard to explain, but I definitely get the sense something important is happening. You know, something likely to change the whole course of history."

"Can't say I've noticed much," responded Ashterrie. "The sky looked just as blue today as it always does!"

"I wasn't referring to the colour of the world!" said Naylen, smiling. "But I keep coming across strange things here, odd

comments there, and uncanny whispers somewhere else, that make me downright suspicious.”

The Chief Master thought for a moment.

“I don’t think any great Dark Lords are trying to take over the world, with armies of orcs or eeriths ready to march out of the Abyss and burn everything down with flames of unholy fire, if that’s what you mean.”

“Maybe not, but something’s not quite right somewhere,” responded Naylen. “It’s as if something big is about to begin but I couldn’t tell you what.”

“Maybe you’ve been on one too many adventures, and need a holiday,” suggested Ashterrie.

“Maybe,” agreed Naylen.

There was a pause. Ashterrie thought things through. Naylen was no idiot, and if he said something strange was going on, then it probably was.

“What you say is curious though,” he remarked.

“How come?” asked Naylen.

“One of my students, a girl named Rhea, found a most impressive object just a few days ago,” said Ashterrie. “In fact, why don’t I show it to you. It did occupy the centre of my table, but now it’s locked away in the vault.”

“Valuable is it?”

“Most certainly. But it’s not its value I’m concerned about.”

“I’m intrigued,” stated Naylen.

“Then step this way,” offered Ashterrie with a glint in his eye.

Deep under the school, and wandering past shelves covered in dust and cobwebs, the two men crept through what must

now be one of the greatest treasure troves in all of Mi-Rethyn. Everything down here was either old, very precious, or extremely rare, and often all three. But none of this interested the men right now. They headed for the far corner of the vault, where lay a pile of wooden packing cases. If you moved them out of the way, as Ashterrie did, then a trap door, set in the floor, would reveal itself to you. Not an ordinary trap door either. Fashioned from metal-clad screne wood, complete with a lock requiring three separate keys, and a very clever anti-lock-picking mechanism, it was a truly formidable barrier. Ashterrie had found the lock and keys some years before, on a particularly exciting escapade, and had subsequently had the whole thing set skilfully into this particular trap door. Only he ever held the keys.

“All this for a candlestick?” asked Naylen in surprise.

Ashterrie glanced back at him.

“I’m not convinced even this lot is enough.”

Getting down on the floor, Palin Ashterrie produced the required three keys from a little pocket in his cape. They were very ordinary-looking keys, so you would never have guessed how important they were, and after turning each key back and forth the required number of times, he eventually pulled up the heavy trap door. A wooden ladder led down into a small chamber within. Once inside, Palin Ashterrie opened an unlocked wooden box, positioned to the left, with his foot. Its lid banged and echoed as it struck the wall. He then stood to one side and held the torch in his right hand down over the case. The candlestick came into view, along with the darker-coloured tiara lying next to it. Naylen gasped.

“My goodness!” he said, looking at the deep blood-red metal object. “Can I pick it up?”

“Be my guest,” said Ashterrie.

Naylen grabbed hold of the candlestick with both hands. Then dropped it at once.

“It’s freezing!” he exclaimed. “How can that be?”

“The metal likes to absorb heat like a sponge,” said Ashterrie. “But it warms up eventually if you grasp it for long enough. I find it best to use a cloth.”

Using a tea towel pinched earlier from the kitchen by the Chief Master, Naylen picked up the candlestick again and held it up, admiring the object. It was fabulous. Such artwork. Such workmanship. And so heavy! The flickering flames of the torch reflected off the metal in a strange way that made the thing seem almost alive. The two men looked at it longingly.

“What do you think?” asked Ashterrie.

“I was hoping you could give me some answers! I would gladly give my life to discover such a relic,” replied Naylen.

“Me give you answers? I’m your teacher, remember! I ask the questions,” said Ashterrie, smiling.

“Very well,” said Naylen. “I’ll play your game.”

“Good!”

Naylen considered the object carefully for a few moments.

“It’s super heavy,” he said presently. “Which implies no mere man could have made it, or at least not today. Only in ancient history, or out of pure legend, did such things ever exist.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Which legend though?” asked Naylen to himself.

Ashterrie waited. He was sure Naylen would work it out. They were both a couple of the finest treasure hunters the world of Mi-Rethyn had ever seen. With sharp minds, they knew of almost every legend there was, and their courage and many, many great adventures had given them experience by the bucket load. Rhea may well be Mr Ashterrie’s best current pupil, but Naylen was probably his best ever. It was not long before the two men gave each other a knowing look.

“Surely not!” said Naylen in awe.

“It could only have come from one place,” said Ashterrie.

“The mines of Megron!” whispered Naylen.

The candlestick seemed to glitter more in the torchlight when the word ‘Megron’ was mentioned, but perhaps it had just been a trick of the light. Naylen put the candlestick down quickly.

“This could be a thing of great evil then. Have you considered that?” asked Naylen.

“Why do you think I keep it here,” said Ashterrie.

“A trap door, even one with three locks, is no defence against evil,” retorted Naylen seriously. “And what is that?” he continued, pointing into the box.

Ashterrie picked up the tiara.

“It’s similar to the candlestick. But the metal is dark blue.”

“Also from Megron, I bet. It may not be even safe to touch. Have you thought of that too?” asked Naylen.

“I have. Though it must be said, a young girl, by the name of Jade Vixoe, wore it for three days straight, and nothing’s happened to her.”

“Nothing’s happened to her yet, you mean! I’d keep an eye on your Jade if I were you,” said Naylen. “Megron! What an awful mess that all was.”

“Indeed.”

Naylen shook his head. Strange things had brought him back to the school and now, on the morning he arrived, this! What in the world was going on?

“Have you decoded these markings? They certainly look weird.”

“We’re trying to work them out now,” said Ashterrie.

Naylen looked at the runes on the tiara. He shook his head again. They were strange, even by his standards. The symbols read in a continuous line with no spaces at all.

“Is it one of the languages of Megron?” asked Naylen.

“No. Nothing like them. We’ve checked. I’ve had young Jade checking languages for the last two days,” said Ashterrie.

“Of course, it could be a secret Megron language no one ever knew about. There was an awful lot never learned concerning that place.”

“Always possible.”

“More than likely you mean. So where in the world did you find these things?” asked Naylen.

“Not far away,” replied the Chief Master.

Ashterrie then told Naylen of the children’s adventure to the lonely old castle, and how Rhea had found the candlestick down a well.

“Like I was saying before, this is all very strange,” said Naylen.

“In what way?”

“Well your pupil Rhea isn’t the only one who’s found some unusual metal objects,” said Naylen, who was now the one with a glint in his eye. “I have too.”

Ashterrie’s eyes went as round as tea saucers.

“Oh yes,” he said, “and do you have them on you?”

“They’re with my other things. That Demos didn’t want me to bring them into the school. They’re weapons.”

“Well don’t worry about him! Go and get them, and while you’re gone, I’ll order us some coffee.”

- Chapter 7 -
Missing Stars and Nameless Forces

“You were lucky not to be expelled!” exclaimed Menonn. “They’ve thrown people out of this school for less than that before now.”

“Yeah, and I reckon it was all your fault all along, and you’re just too scared to admit it!” piped in Jade.

“What bosh! I tell you those ropes were as loose as all those silly bangles round your wrist!” retorted Brandon.

Jade shook her arm and made the four or five metal rings she was wearing jingle loudly.

“Can’t be that loose since they haven’t fallen off, unlike certain barrels I can think of!” said Jade, smiling.

“Fancy getting away with smashing up all Mrs Habbit’s flowerpots, and an entire tool shed! Unbelievable!” said Menonn, shaking his head.

“I give up, I really do!” said Brandon, throwing his hands up in resignation. “No one’s going to believe a word I say. I can see this will be the way of it for the rest of my life!”

The children were standing in the square-shaped entrance lobby that led into the great octagonal school library. Although people actually inside the library were only allowed to speak in hushed tones, no rule had been set about the lobby, so the morning’s events were being discussed here.

“Good job that stranger turned up though,” said Menonn to Brandon. “He did you a real favour as far as I can see.”

“Not half!” agreed Brandon.

“I wonder what his story is?” mused Jade.

“No idea, but I’m sure we can find out. He seems to be a friend of Mr Ashterrie. We could ask him later,” suggested Menonn.

“Yeah, we’ll do that,” nodded Brandon. “I suppose we better get back to work now. More constellation hunting. What fun.”

The three children wandered into the octagonal library. Brandon and Menonn marched right over to the tables, still heaped up with books, where they’d more or less built a camp the previous day. Jade, however, headed toward the railings in the middle of the octagon, to do nothing other than look straight up. She loved the view from this spot. Shelves and shelves of books towered and towered with dizzying height into the vast tall space above you. Built on twelve distinct levels, the library was as high as a tall castle tower. From the bottom of its basement to the top of the Sky Room, its centre was a single hollow cylinder, so you could see the whole lot in one go. And with its clever glass roof, the books often looked as if they rose straight into the sky. Large cast iron steps led up in two huge spirals, around the inner walls, to give an additional helical effect to the building. The whole thing was a stunning piece of architecture.

As well as having books around the edge, each level had eight great shelves that ran from the outer walls toward the middle. The shelves on the lower floors were carved out of solid rock since no wood could possibly take the weight of the thousands and thousands of books that had been heaped up over the years. None were boring books either. All contained useful knowledge for the aspiring treasure hunter. Needless to say, no other school in all of Wixingdale had such a fine library.

“I’m going to find this constellation, even if it’s the last thing I ever do,” muttered Brandon to himself, while looking over the several huge maps of the heavens that lay before him.

Menonn came across and stood gazing at one particularly large and beautiful black map. As well as being covered with white dots, on it were drawn the figures and mythical creatures that represented the heavens of Mi-Rethyn.

“Having some trouble?” Menonn asked quietly.

“Just a bit,” said Brandon. “I’m still looking for a pattern of stars that match those on my anvil shield.”

Brandon had spent all yesterday afternoon looking at stars, till his eyes ached, but hadn’t found very much. Menonn sat down and picked up the rusty shield which had been resting against one of the shelves. It wasn’t a particularly big shield and weighed very little.

“Are you sure they’re stars on here? They could be flower heads, or mountain tops, or symbols in some strange writing, or anything at all really.”

“They look like stars to me, I’m sure of it,” said Brandon, “but I still can’t find them.”

Menonn stared hard at the shield, trying to imagine who’d made it. The anvil symbol should have been a big giveaway, but not many empires or kingdoms had ever had an anvil in their flags or emblems that he knew of.

Not many empires. The words seemed to hang in Menonn’s mind like an endless whisper. This was odd, he thought. It was almost as if they’d been whispered once, but rather than going away, their sound just stayed right in your head. Not many empires. How utterly strange, thought Menonn, looking about. But before he could think about it too much longer, the whisper

changed. Now the words ‘not many stars’ filled his mind. But this time the whisper died away like a normal sound. Menonn took one more look at the shield and put it down quickly. An eerie sensation then seemed to settle around the table for a few moments after, and then that was gone as well. Menonn wondered if he was feeling alright. But as far as he could tell, he was fine.

“Any ideas?” asked Brandon, who’d noticed nothing unusual.

“I don’t know,” replied Menonn with a far-off tone to his voice.

The whispers and feelings may have gone but the thought ‘not many stars’ was still as fresh as ever in Menonn’s head. It was all very queer, but the three words started to make sense.

“What if some of the original shield stars have rusted right off!” he then said suddenly. “That would explain why you can’t find very much. Only a few are left.”

Brandon thought about that, while Menonn’s eyes started scanning the beautiful black map, glancing back at the shield every few moments, to remind himself of what he was looking for.

“Possible I suppose. I noticed yesterday that these three stars here do match three on the shield, but they’re not in the same constellation,” said Brandon pointing his fingers at the map and shield in turn. “You’d have thought that whoever made the thing, would have tried to get a single whole constellation on.”

“But look here! These three stars match the other three on the shield,” exclaimed Menonn.

“And they are also spread right over several constellations, those of the Ring, Cloranus, and Juelus,” stated Brandon. “So if these two bright stars here, are a couple that rusted right off the shield, then we have it!”

“Great! So what now?” asked Menonn.

“Now,” said Brandon, “we have yet more work. We have to find out what these three constellations stand for. Let’s get Jade to give us a hand.”

Menonn was just talking to Jade about this when Rhea wandered into the library and came over to the boys.

“Ha! We’ve cracked it!” said Brandon to Rhea.

“Indeed! I heard someone had ‘cracked’ open the tool shed,” she said, grinning.

“Forget about that!” said Brandon, slightly annoyed. “I meant we’ve found out what the stars on my shield are. We’re about to hunt down the history of their constellations. Why don’t you help us?”

“But I’ve my own work to do,” Rhea replied.

“Yes, but if we work together as a team, we’ll get things done faster. We can first sort out these constellations, then crack Jade’s ‘secret runes’, figure out who this Rudine Vaxen was, put it all together, and hence solve the mystery of where that candlestick came from! Then to cap it all, we write a report, hand it in, and wait for them to give us the school prize for the best treasure hunt find of the year! I mean, no one’s going to top this lot, are they? This year’s prize is ours for the taking!”

“Where do I start then?” sighed Rhea, seeing Brandon was in one of his ‘let’s get things moving’ kind of moods, and arguing would be a complete waste of time.

“Astronomy. Right. Off we go! Top floor!” said Brandon in a commanding tone of voice.

“I’ll stay here if you don’t mind,” said Menonn, tapping his shiny black cane against a table. “Climbing up those iron steps will do me no good at all.”

“You keep going on the runes then, since you got started yesterday. We can all meet up over lunch,” suggested Brandon.

Jade, Rhea, and Brandon then started the long climb up the library tower.

Once Naylen was out of the school vault, which was then locked by Mr Ashterrie, he headed off to the stable area to find his possessions, assuming the lads out there hadn’t lost them! Meanwhile, Ashterrie wandered along to the kitchen area and ordered coffee and wheat biscuits for two.

“How’s your guest?” asked Salice.

“He’s fine. An ex-pupil of mine. Not been here for eleven years.”

“Wow! Why’s he back now then?”

“We were just talking about that.”

Salice sensed that might be all Mr Ashterrie was going to tell her.

“Is he staying?” she then asked, hoping he was.

“We’ll see. You just bring the coffee and snacks.”

“Of course, sir.”

Salice brought them along presently and found the two men talking about some of the things currently going on in the world. Which leader of what province was thinking of extending their capital city, and other matters of that nature. Once the kitchen girl had gone, Naylen leaned over the side of

his seat, took hold of the velvet black cloth lying on the office floor, and gave it to the Chief Master.

“Something new for your collection,” said Naylen, with a smile.

“This is exciting, isn’t it!” said Ashterrie, taking the cloth to his table and unwrapping it. “Almost like having a birthday!”

However, Ashterrie had never received anything like the contents of the black cloth as a birthday present. Two weapons now lay exposed to the light. The first was a sword. But not any old sword. It was a superb weapon in every way. Anybody could tell you that much. Holding it up, Ashterrie noticed how the silver-white blade glittered in the sunlight currently streaming through the windows. The handle was not a design he recognised, and no symbol had been engraved into the sword’s hilt. That was odd. Such a fine weapon should have been marked in some way, he thought.

“What do you think?” asked Naylen, who was glad he now had a chance to ask the questions.

Mr Ashterrie studied it carefully.

“The quality looks good. In fact, it looks very good,” he said, now looking along the narrow triangular blade. “It appears somewhat sharp too.”

“Very sharp. Too sharp in fact. The blade is stronger than iron, and the metal is not one I can easily identify. It’s light as well,” responded Naylen.

“Yes. The exact opposite of our candlestick. Assuming the two are related of course. And what is this?” asked Ashterrie, holding up a black staff with a hefty four-bladed spearhead fastened to each end.

“I don’t know exactly. Probably some kind of cross between a staff and a spear. But the ends are lethal!”

“Have you used it?” asked the Chief Master, swinging it rapidly above his head, thus causing the blades on the staff ends to whistle with an uncanny ringing sound as they sliced through the air.

“On a few occasions. It’s a fantastic weapon. Light, fast and deadly. Better than anything I’ve seen before, and I’ve seen a lot in my time. A whole army carrying these, and well-trained in their use, would be a formidable foe!”

“A whole army,” muttered Ashterrie, carefully feeling the quartet of blades that made up the spear ends. “One would hope not.”

“Indeed,” said Naylen, thinking similar thoughts.

“Where did you get them?”

“Came across both by chance. Way down south near the Rulen Mountains,” answered Naylen.

“The Rulen Mountains!” exclaimed Mr Ashterrie. “That’s practically the bottom of the world. What could have made you travel down there?”

“Ah. I was investigating a certain lost fortune some sea pirates were supposed to have hidden hundreds of years before.”

“Any luck in finding the treasure?” asked Ashterrie.

“No. I couldn’t quite locate it, but the clues led eventually to an old watchtower up in the lower Rulen slopes. Inside, just lying on the floor was that sword, and to one side, the staff. No sign of the treasure though, and unfortunately the clues ran out at that point.”

“Perhaps someone beat you to it?” suggested Ashterrie.

“Perhaps,” said Naylen. “Though it wouldn’t have been the first time. I remember you teaching that being able to get to a treasure hoard, before others do, is one of the true marks of a real adventurer.”

Ashterrie nodded. A truer word was never spoken. Back to matters at hand though.

“A watchtower you say? What would anybody be watching for in the Rulen Mountains? No one lives down there surely?” he continued.

“Don’t ask me. At the tower, the trail went stone cold, so I took the sword and staff, and decided to finally come back here. But strange swords, strange staffs, and now strange candlesticks from Megron are starting to make me feel very uneasy.”

The Chief Master picked up the silver-white sword again. Some rare skill would have been needed to fashion this beauty.

“It’s who might be crafting these strange objects, and why, that uneases me,” said Ashterrie, looking again at the unmarked sword hilt.

Naylen glanced at the large picture of the Rift Wood trees hanging on the far wall of Ashterrie’s office. The painting reminded him of many long walks he’d taken along various forest trails, winding through the Rift Wood, while a pupil at the school. Often Naylen felt some kind of presence filling the air between the trees, but had never been able to contemplate what it could be. For a moment or two, he thought he could almost hear the sound of rustling leaves as if the trees were whispering to each other in the wind. But then there was silence. You must be imagining things Naylen, he told himself. He took his eyes off the picture.

“Perhaps some new nameless force is on the prowl, over a good deal of Mi-Rethyn,” suggested Naylen next.

“A nameless force? Must be plenty of them around I’m sure,” said Ashterrie, now swinging the light sword around a bit.

“Maybe, but not many have weapons of this calibre,” said Naylen pointing back at the bladed staff.

“No, and the last thing we need is a return to days of old when vast armies marched over our world spreading death and chaos,” commented Ashterrie in a low voice, while putting the sword back down. “Would also make running a school very difficult. What are you planning next then?”

“Well for the moment, to be honest, nothing at all. I just don’t know enough to plan anything. I was thinking of asking your permission to stay at RiftWood for a while. A rest will do me good, and I’m sure I could help out here and there, where needed,” suggested Naylen.

“The school is yours, my friend,” said Mr Ashterrie who was delighted Naylen was staying on. “I’ll get the domestic housekeeper to set up some lodgings. You know, thinking about it, we could do with a chap like you around. A real live ‘dyed in the wool’ adventurer! That’ll give the other children something to aspire to.”

“Most kind of you,” said Naylen respectfully. “So what sort of students do you have here at the moment?”

“Not a bad lot overall I would say,” said Ashterrie. “In particular, there’s this bunch of five who often go round together. They seem quite good. The girl Rhea who found the candlestick is one of them.”

“Would the young man Brandon Harfaves be another of their number?” asked Naylen, smiling.

“He would indeed,” said Ashterrie, also smiling, “as are his friends Jade, Menonn, and Clarne. They’re a promising lot, despite all their problems. You’d do well to get to know them.”

“I shall make a point of it,” said Naylen.

WATER

- Chapter 8 -
The Aeon of Dark Mist

Waiting for the children at the top of the library tower was the fabulous Sky Room, one of the real wonders of the school. From up here you could see everything. First, if you felt like it, you could look straight down through the myriad books into the faraway depths of the rock below, since the library basement went four whole levels underground. Or you could look out through the walls, all cleverly fashioned from sheets of curved glass, and gaze upon the local area. And then, of course, you could peer up through the glass domed roof, straight into the sky.

During the day all you would see were clouds or sheer blue, but on a crisp clear evening, the wonders of the Mi-Rethyn night sky would shine forth in all their glory. The purpose of the Sky Room was mainly to teach and perform astronomy, without pupils having to be outside all night in the cold. However, being so high off the ground, the good view of the whole area was very useful for teaching local geography as well. Jade tried to show off her local knowledge by pointing out the river Rene, the expanse of the Rift Wood, and various nearby meadows. On a good day, you could see Salice's home village of Loxrift, or rather you could glimpse the top of the village bell tower, poking above the Rift Wood trees. On a really, really good day, if the sun caught them at the right angle, you could just about make out the massive White Towers built at WixWyn, far to the west.

As luck would have it, one of the astronomy teachers, Miss Kyrith, happened to be working just below the Sky Room.

When the three friends came down from enjoying the view, she looked up and asked if they were all right.

"Yes Miss," said Brandon. "We came to find out about some constellations."

"I see. Planning to stay up all night and observe the stars, are we?" asked Miss Kyrith.

"Well, not exactly," answered Jade.

Brandon explained about the shield and its embossed pattern of stars.

"I mean, why would people put stars on a shield?" asked Rhea.

"Well the stars probably represent something," answered Miss Kyrith.

"You mean a bit like an emblem or a flag?" suggested Jade.

"Exactly," replied Miss Kyrith. "Many stars and constellations have a symbolic meaning, and people have often used them to picture or denote something important."

"Well what do the Ring, Cloranus, and Juelus mean then?" asked Jade, reading the names off the piece of paper Brandon had given her, since she couldn't remember them off the top of her head.

Miss Kyrith got up from the heavy oak table she was working at and went to one of the enormous library shelves. Pulling out a particularly big book, she dropped it on a desk with a thud and opened it up. Beautiful pictures of all the constellations, and the legendary figures they represented, filled the pages, each of them drawn with great skill and artistry. Miss Kyrith's nimble fingers flipped rapidly through the leaves of paper.

“Here we are,” she said presently. “Cloranus and the Ring of Goblin Force.”

“Goblins!” exclaimed Brandon. “Where do horrible green slimy goblins come into all this! I thought this was supposed to be an extremely serious library, not a little children’s fairy story corner!”

Rhea felt strange at the mention of the word ‘goblin’. For some reason, an image of the blue tiara drifted into her mind. Jade liked goblins. She liked all things like that. Elves, dwarfs, fauns, and centaurs. She’d read books and books and books that were full of them.

“Well if you listen up, then you’ll find out,” said Miss Kyrith to Brandon. “Now, when you’re ready, the legend goes like this...”

Long ago there was a poor young man named Cloranus, who one day decided to leave the small village he’d lived in all his life, and go on a great adventure to make his fortune.

After many journeys and talking to many people, he came to realise that the best way to get rich would be to steal the most valuable object in all the world and then sell it to the highest bidder. So packing some things together in a small bag, he set off on this, his final and greatest quest. After travelling long and hard, for many days and many nights, he finally reached the land of Dabreca and climbed down into the deep dark caves of Jythrūn.

Once there, he then managed, by his great wits and intrepid skill, to steal the most valuable thing in existence, the great sapphire ring of the goblin king, Methosane. Now the goblin king was enraged when he found the ring had gone, so he and all his shrieking, screaming goblin hoards chased Cloranus

back through the caves of Jythrūn, and out into the open air of Dabreca again.

However, when the orange rays of the sun hit Methosane, then because he was a goblin, he was turned instantly into black stone and became an ancient crumbling statue in moments. The other goblins were then all terrified and ran back deep into the caves, still shrieking and howling! Cloranus, who was now all alone, thought it the luckiest day of his life and made plans to sell the ring and thus make himself very rich.

Later that night however, when the sun had gone down, the ring Cloranus so valued, and now wore as a trophy on his finger, worked its power against him, and changed him from a man into a goblin! So now it was Cloranus who had to run into the caves of Jythrūn before dawn, lest the orange rays of the sun turn him into a black crumbling statue as well!

Cloranus soon became very depressed at the thought of having to spend forever more crawling about in caves to avoid the sun, so he prayed to the gods of heaven to have pity on him.

The gods heard his prayer and then had a big discussion. Some thought Cloranus had been very stupid, and wanted to leave him to suffer as he was, to teach him a lesson. Others, however, were pleased Methosane, the goblin king, was now dead and said he deserved a reward. So the arguments went back and forth.

Finally, the gods agreed to change Cloranus back into a man. But they also set him amongst the stars, as a constellation, so he couldn’t go on any more careless adventures, and get into so much trouble. They also thought it a good idea to take the goblin sapphire ring, and put that into the stars as well, so no one would ever again get accidentally

turned into a goblin by its vast power. And that's the legend behind the constellations of Cloranus and the Ring."

"What a nice story," said Jade.

"What a load of absolute bosh!" said Brandon, who didn't believe in gods or goblins, and had no intention of doing so either.

"Maybe, but that's what the bright blue star Tanaak, in the ring constellation represents. It's symbolic of the great sapphire on the Ring of Goblin Force," said Miss Kyrith. "The ancient peoples used to believe in all this kind of thing you know."

"I try to believe in things like that even today," said Jade proudly.

"You'd believe anything," said Brandon sneering, "especially all those crazy things you read about in your storybooks."

Jade felt a bit put down by that.

"What about Juelus?" then asked Rhea, who'd listened with great interest to the Cloranus legend. "What's his story?"

Miss Kyrith flipped over some more pages.

"Juelus and the Great Ring. Here we are.

Now Juelus was Cloranus' evil brother. Sometime after the gods had put the goblin ring into the heavens, and Cloranus along with it, Juelus decided it would be a great idea to steal the ring for himself, and so succeed where his foolish brother had failed. That would show him! So Juelus spent many days, and many nights, thinking both long and hard about how he was going to get the ring out of the stars, but eventually, he came up with the most fantastic plan.

First, he got all his money together and travelled a long, long way to the land of Narranbech, to buy a top-rate fishing

rod and a small hook from an extremely skilled craftsman. Then he visited one of the dark schools of magic that covered that evil land, and there Juelus bought a long piece of thin black thread, that by magic, was almost everlasting in length. He then tied his silver hook to one end of the thread, wound the rest into the mechanism of his fishing rod, and climbed all the one-thousand seven-hundred and forty-six stone steps to the very top of the great tower of Narranbech. Waiting until nearly midnight, by which time the ring constellation was high in the sky, Juelus, with a wicked, wicked smile upon his face, swung the fishing rod around with all his might and let his hook sail far into the deep dark sky.

And just as Juelus planned, the hook tied to the nearly endless thread, was able to reach into the heavens and catch hold of the ring set among the stars, thus bringing it back to the ordinary world. Unbelievable! The star Tanaak just disappeared right out of the sky, as it became once again the great sapphire, set in the goblin ring, and easily the most valuable object in all the world.

Juelus didn't put the ring on though, since he was not wanting to become a goblin himself, unlike his stupid brother had done! Rather, he then went to the caves of Jythrund, and used the ring to control all the other goblins, since they were sworn, from ancient times, to obey the ring's owner as their one true king. Thus with all the goblins of Jythrund under his sole command, Juelus was no longer thinking about just money. Now, with the same wicked smile upon his face, he set out to do nothing less than take over the entire world!

However, Cloranus, who could see all that was going on, from his position among the stars, made an offer to the gods. If

they let him return to the world, then he would do all he could to stop his evil brother. The gods were delighted at this since they hadn't been able to work out how they were going to stop Juelus and his mad plan.

The problem was Cloranus could only come back as a goblin, having been changed into one by the ring. Since, however, he'd originally been a man and not a goblin, the ring held no further power over him, so Cloranus didn't have to obey Juelus as his king, unlike all the other goblins of Dabreca. Therefore, using his intrepid wits and skill, he was able to once again creep into the caves of Jythrún, and steal the ring a second time, from right under the nose of his evil brother Juelus. That would show him who was best!

Juelus though, like Methosane before him, was also enraged Cloranus had stolen the ring, and once again all the shrieking goblin hordes chased Cloranus through the Jythrún caves and out into the open air of Dabreca. But just as the sun was about to turn Cloranus into black stone, and then into an ancient statue that would crumble away, the gods reached down and put him back amongst the stars as a man, along with the ring he was carrying. So the great sapphire once again became the blue star Tanaak. The gods also grabbed hold of Juelus at this point and threw him into the stars as well! And that's where they've been ever since. The gods made quite sure Cloranus was forever standing guard between Juelus and the Ring of Goblin Force, so Juelus can never get his hands on it again. And there ends the legend. There's even a picture of them here," finished Miss Kyrith.

A beautifully drawn illustration showed the three constellations of Cloranus, Juelus and the Ring, with the star Tanaak clearly labelled.

"And I bet they all lived happily ever after!" added Brandon sarcastically.

Rhea looked at him intensely.

"So how does that story fit in with your shield?" she asked teasingly. "And with your plans to win this year's school treasure-hunting prize?"

"Well that's the mystery, isn't it? Someone has made that shield, wanting to trick whoever found it, into thinking it was made by goblins! Of course, we're not fooled, and we just have to find out why they'd want to do that, and what they were really up to," explained Brandon proudly.

"Maybe the shield is a real goblin shield," suggested Jade, "and the goblin owner will come into your bedroom one night and gobble you up!"

"All right. Laugh it up you lot, but I'm not giving in yet!" exclaimed Brandon. "There must be more to this than what we've read so far."

"Quite right too," said Miss Kyrith, "and when you two have quite finished," she said looking at the girls, "we can check another book."

"But won't that have the same legends in it?" asked Jade.

"Not if it concerns the constellations around from before the Aeon of Dark Mist," replied Miss Kyrith.

Mention of the Aeon of Dark Mist sent a chill down Rhea's spine.

"The Dark Mist? What's that?" asked Jade.

“It was a time long ago,” answered Miss Kyrith slowly, not really wanting to explain more here.

“I’ll tell you later, Jade,” said Rhea. “I learned about it in history last year. It’s not a happy story.”

“Indeed not,” said Miss Kyrith, picking up the large constellation book, and carrying it with both hands back to its place on the shelves.

“Books and stuff about the Aeon of Dark Mist, and the time before, are kept locked up in the library basement,” said Miss Kyrith, looking over a railing edge, and down the central octagonal shaft into the depths far below. “How about if I take you down there tomorrow after lunch?”

“Great!” said Jade.

The other two nodded.

“Thanks, Miss Kyrith,” said Rhea.

“You’re welcome,” she replied.

The children then started down the long winding spiral staircase that led to ground level.

“Why would someone want to impersonate a goblin in a sad old castle?” asked Brandon to himself. “What do you think Rhea?”

“Going down these stairs, I can’t think, because I’m getting dizzy,” was all Rhea could say.

But she knew full well this mystery was slowly getting deeper and deeper with each passing day.

- Chapter 9 -
A Game of Skill and Trouble with Axes

Following his fall that morning, when he'd tried to kick a moving barrel, Brandon had developed something of a thumping headache by mid-afternoon and wasn't in a very good mood at all, which was probably why Menonn was beating him at a game of Julnave.

"I'd have done that," said Clarne, as Menonn moved his yellow queen next to one of Brandon's blue executioners.

Brandon groaned. All three of his knights, and most of his remaining wolves, were under attack now.

"This is so unfair! I can't think, my head hurts too much," he declared.

"Real battles have to be fought under harsh conditions, so think of this as a test of your ability to cope under pressure," suggested Clarne.

Brandon usually liked Clarne, but she could be a trifle annoying at times, such as now he thought. He stared at the board. What was Menonn up to?

Julnave was a game of battle and strategy, played on a six-sided board, where both players had two sets of pieces. Brandon's white and blue army was up against Menonn's black and yellow forces. The aim was to get enough bits simultaneously attacking both the opponent's kings so that you won the game. The rules were quite complicated. Various pieces could move in strange ways across the board, and often you could only move one bit if another was in a particular position and so on. This made it all very tense. Battle situations could swing alarmingly quickly. So while at one moment, you

might think you could be winning, a few moves later, you were more often or not in serious trouble!

Brandon thought for a bit longer and then shifted his blue prince up one side of the board towards Menonn's black king. A move which also allowed another of Brandon's white wolves to increase the pressure on the yellow swordmaster. That should make Menonn think twice, he thought with a smile.

Rhea and Jade wandered into the games room. Rhea studied the board as Menonn considered his next turn.

"Why don't you move your princess into the middle a bit more? That way Brandon's wolves really will be mincemeat," Rhea commented to Menonn.

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Brandon. "Not only have I got an awful headache, but now the opposition is getting outside help!"

"Just giving Menonn a hint, that's all," said Rhea.

"Well give him a hint that'll help him lose," mumbled Brandon.

"That's not very nice," said Jade.

"I'm not in a very nice mood," muttered Brandon.

All this time, Menonn was trying to concentrate, but it was hard work with an argument going on around you. He took hold of his black princess, but rather than do what Rhea suggested, he moved it out to the side.

"Why did you do that?" asked Clarne, still following the game.

"You'll see," said Menonn cunningly, who'd decided by now he was winning easily enough on his own, and thus didn't need any help from the girls.

Jade looked at the board. She didn't fully understand this game yet. She preferred card games, especially those based on Sasko cards. Brandon brought his white cardinal back to defend his pieces on the side not far from both his kings. It was a good defensive move. Menonn sighed. This was going to be more tricky than he first thought.

"Be careful Menonn," said Jade, "or else Brandon's pieces will suddenly turn into goblins and eat all yours up!"

Menonn ignored the comment. His fingers were hovering over the yellow griffin on the right-hand side of the board, away from the main action. Griffins were flying pieces, and so could cover large distances in a single move. Menonn certainly made his move! Suddenly Brandon's blue king had a griffin bearing down on it menacingly, and his defence looked all but gone.

"I'd resign if I were you," said Rhea.

"Well you're not me, so why don't you buzz off somewhere, and leave us experts alone," replied Brandon, who decided it was time to spring the trap he'd been building up over the last ten turns.

Suddenly the white executioner cut down Menonn's yellow griffin and off the board it went. Next, the moves came quick and fast. The yellow swordmaster took out the white executioner but was wiped out instantly by a lone blue wolf. A black wolf took out that one, which itself was defeated by a second blue one. Two cardinals, a princess, a queen and a watchtower all disappeared in the next few moves. Jade picked up and examined the dead pieces. She liked the shapes of these carved wooden playing figures.

"Steady on guys," said Clarne. "There'll be nothing left soon!"

Another queen fell by the sword and all four remaining wolves were swapped off. That left the kings and only a few other bits on the board. Both Menonn and Brandon had been ready for each other. Now with fewer pieces to play with, things were even more tricky. Brandon's white watchtower was stuck way out on its own. He moved it nearer to one of his kings.

"You should be able to finish him off now," said Clarne to Menonn.

Rhea reached out and picked up the blue princess playing piece. She stood looking at it for some time. Somehow the beautifully hand-painted figure seemed very important. But I don't know anyone who is a princess, Rhea thought, and neither am I likely to. However, the thoughts in her mind were strong and persistent. She remembered what one of her teachers had once said, about a thought being a real thing, and having real power.

It was thoughts, like the one concerning the dot on the map, representing the old castle, that had led to the discovery of the red candlestick. And if what Naylen and Mr Ashterrie had said was true, then said candlestick was from a very evil place indeed. Rhea put the princess back down quickly. Clarne, though, had noticed the intense way Rhea had studied the blue playing piece.

"Are you all right?" she asked Rhea quietly.

"I don't know," replied the puzzled girl. "I was thinking about that candlestick again. In fact, I always seem to be thinking about that red candlestick."

"What about it?" quizzed Clarne.

Rhea looked across at the boys playing. Menonn was closing in for the kill on Brandon's white king, while also setting up an attack on his blue.

"They think it's from Megron," whispered Rhea.

Clarne glanced at Rhea, a slight look of shock on her face.

"Who does?" she asked.

"Naylen and Ashterrie. I was talking with them soon after lunch. They've put the candlestick and tiara down in the school vault, out of the way. I'm starting to get a nasty feeling about all this."

"Megron, and all that, was a long time ago," said Clarne thoughtfully. "Even if the candlestick is from there, it can't mean much now."

Rhea glanced at the blue princess. Clarne saw her eyes move.

"What's so interesting about this then?" asked Clarne, picking up the playing piece in question. "I notice you keep looking at it."

"I don't know. It just seems important," said Rhea.

"How?" asked Clarne.

"I can't explain it," said Rhea sighing, "but it was the same with that sad old castle. I had a thought about the dot that marks it on a map, you know, the one I kept showing you before we went."

Clarne did remember. Clarne also remembered what Salice had said about Rhea being a bit strange since coming back from that trip, and for the first time in ages, Clarne felt worried about her best friend. For most of the last two years, it had been the other way around, with Rhea worrying about her.

"Yes!" said Menonn suddenly in triumph.

"Well it was a close thing, and I do have a headache," exclaimed Brandon.

"I think Menonn did really well since you usually win all these sorts of games," chimed in Jade.

The julnave game was finally over.

"They've finished," said Clarne, "and it looks like it was a good match."

"Yes," said Rhea looking a bit dejected, "but I am starting to feel like a small piece in a much bigger game."

The girl paused, again glancing at the blue princess.

"I hope nothing horrible happens to me," she said sadly.

"What's going to happen to you?" asked Clarne, starting to get very concerned.

Rhea shook her head.

"Images and things keep drifting into my mind. It's more than a little unnerving," she confessed.

Clarne hadn't seen Rhea like this for a long time, not since that horrible winter of sickness, over a year ago, when everybody had been pushed to the limit.

"Have the nightmares come back?" Clarne asked.

Rhea shook her head again. Thinking about it, she'd not had one for ages now. Not since returning to the school last spring, after Clarne recovered somewhat.

"We got through that terrible time, you know, when I was ill," Clarne said in a quiet voice. "We'll get through this as well."

Rhea thought for a moment. Clarne was right. They'd been through worse things than suspect candlesticks from a bygone age. Rhea smiled.

“You’re probably correct, as usual. Come on! There might still be some roasted seed cakes left in the tea lounge if we hurry.”

“Let’s shift you lot,” said Clarne out loud. “Let’s go for afternoon tea!”

“Oh yes!” said Jade. “Let’s go!”

The two boys nodded and returned the playing pieces to their wonderfully decorated wooden box. The hexagonal board was set into the table though, so you couldn’t pack that away. Soon after, all five of the children left the games room and headed off to the tea lounge, chatting, making jokes, and calling each other silly names as they went.

Back in the games room though, the blue princess playing piece remained on the table where Clarne had left it. Standing upright and alone in the middle of the hexagonal board, it now looked more important than ever.

“...and that’s when Mrs Habbit found her, just after she’d dropped the pies and was trying to pick them up without being noticed!” exclaimed Salice, grinning.

Brandon laughed out loud.

“And I suppose Demos said he’d never touched any of them,” he said, chuckling.

“Too right, and that poor girl was in so much trouble! I doubt if she’ll ever get out of Mrs Habbit’s bad books now,” continued Salice, laughing.

The axe head flew past Salice’s side, missed her by less than a hand’s width, and embedded itself in the wooden fence behind. She looked around in shock and then stared back at Brandon.

“Was that intended for me?” she shouted.

“It just fell off!” exclaimed Brandon, looking in shock at the wooden handle he was holding, which no longer had an axe head fixed to its far end.

Salice stood up.

“Are you sure?” she asked in growing anger.

“I tell you, it just came off, as I swung this axe down,” said Brandon as clearly as he could.

“And how could that happen?” she asked, a scowl on her face.

“Well it might have been a bit loose,” he said sheepishly.

“So you were cutting wood with an axe that had a loose head?” asked Salice in disbelief.

“It wasn’t that loose, just a bit wobbly,” said Brandon apologetically.

“Just a bit,” said Salice, her hands on her hips.

Brandon shrugged his shoulders.

“Just a bit!” she then shouted out, almost at the top of her voice. “Don’t you ever cut wood near me again!”

Salice stormed off. Brandon looked at the handle, shaking his head. You stupid idiot, he thought to himself, as he wandered over to the wooden fence and pulled the axe-head out. This was another great example of Brandon Harfaves trying to help out, and it all going horribly wrong.

Salice had wanted a load of wood to be cut up before evening, and since Demos and Brickly were busy, Brandon had offered to help out. What he didn’t know, is the axe he’d picked up, had been used earlier that day to hack at some screne wood posts. Screne wood is very, very strong and Brickly had given the axe a real pounding, thus weakening the head. Brandon

didn't think that would be a problem and so just carried on. Oh dear. If Salice had been injured then Brandon would have been horrified.

Next, a kitchen girl wandered past, looking very dejected indeed. Brandon wondered if she might be the one he and Salice had been talking about earlier.

"What were you two shouting about?" asked the girl sadly.

"She was doing the shouting, not me," said Brandon in reply.

The girl smiled. Brickly and Trent then came around the corner. Trent worked around the school buildings, fixing things. He was always fixing things, even if they didn't need mending. Brickly noticed Brandon holding an axe-head.

"What have you done?" he asked.

"It came off," said Brandon.

"Well, course it did. Me and Trent were slicing screne wood with it. You have to re-head axes after cutting screne you do," said Brickly. "Ain't that right Trent?"

"Sure is. Use that thing and you could get someone killed!" remarked Trent.

If only I'd known before, thought Brandon. I must remember this in future. Axes and screne wood don't mix.

"Are there any good axes left?" asked Brandon. "I need to cut up this wood."

Trent went into the wood store and brought out another axe, handing it to Brandon. He and Brickly then left to go and fix something else. Brandon pulled hard at the axe-head. It didn't wobble a jot. Soon he was chopping wood again. The girl sat down where Salice had been.

"I'd move if I were you," remarked Brandon. "The last person who sat there nearly got their head cut off!"

"Wouldn't bother me," said the girl. "I think I'm finished here."

Brandon was now convinced this was the same girl Salice had mentioned.

"In trouble with Mrs Habbit?" he asked carefully.

The girl nodded.

"You don't want to worry about that. I smashed all her flowerpots earlier today, and I'm still alive!" said Brandon in a slightly boastful tone.

"So that was you?" said the girl in surprise. "I heard about that little adventure."

"I'm Brandon. Brandon Harfaves."

"Kallijine, but most people call me Kalli."

"They're both nice names," said Brandon. "Most people just call me 'Trouble', but I do try, I really do."

Salice came back. A look of worry spread over Kallijine's face.

"You better come back now," said Salice to Kallijine. "I think Mrs Habbit has managed to calm down."

Brandon noticed the scared look on Kallijine's face. She obviously didn't want to go back. Better to be locked in a cage, with a hungry three-headed lion, than be stuck in a kitchen with a mad Mrs Habbit, he thought.

"Why can't she stay and help me?" then suggested Brandon.

"Her help a dangerous lunatic like you!" said Salice with a sneer. "I doubt it."

"It was just an idea," offered Brandon.

“I know how to use an axe,” said Kallijine, “and there is a lot of wood.”

Salice thought for a moment. The wood did need cutting, and it needed cutting fast.

“All right, but don’t blame me if you get hurt,” she said to Kallijine, while looking at Brandon.

“I won’t,” said Kallijine.

Salice left again. Kallijine got a second axe from the store, and soon she and Brandon were racing each other, to hack up as much wood as they possibly could before it got dark.

Just before they finally went in, Brandon noticed a bright bluish-white star in the southwestern sky. That must be Tanaak, he thought. It was one of the stars on his old rusty shield. How strange it got involved in all those legends, concerning all that goblin hogwash I heard earlier. I wonder what’s really going on, and why that star is really on my shield?

- Chapter 10 -
The Most Horrible Story in History

“The what?” asked Jade puzzled, her mouth full of the butter toffee she’d kept since supper until now.

“The ShipYard Tridom,” repeated Rhea. “That’s what Mr Ashterrie and Naylen think the candlestick might be all about.”

“Never heard of it,” said Menonn.

“Me neither,” chimed in Brandon.

It was late, and getting ever later, as the four children gathered in Rhea’s school room, to talk about certain historical events that happened long ago. Only a few lighted candles kept the darkness at bay. Clarne, with her illness, still couldn’t stay awake much beyond early evening, and so had gone to bed sometime before.

“Well, go on! Tell us all about it,” said Jade to Rhea.

“It’s a bit of a long story, and it’s getting really late,” responded Rhea. “Can’t we do this tomorrow?”

“Please tell us!” exclaimed Jade, more loudly than she intended.

Rhea knocked her on the arm.

“Keep your voice down, other people are probably trying to sleep,” she said.

“Sorry,” apologised Jade quietly. “But I love stories.”

“And none of us needs to get up early tomorrow,” said Menonn in a measured tone, “so we could hear it tonight.”

“ ‘The ShipYard Tridom’ by Rhea Cantonell,” stated Brandon in an official-sounding voice. “Should be a classic tale, though I think I’d prefer to hear about the ‘Fish and Chip

Tridom’! We’ve not had fish for ages in the school dinner hall, and I really miss it!”

Rhea gave Brandon one of her really cold ‘Why don’t you just shut up!’ looks, and then started telling them what she knew from various school history lessons.

“Very well. The ShipYard Tridom is an episode of ancient history, set before the Aeon of Dark Mist, that you might come across next year if they decide to teach the Pre-Dark Mist history course again. Therefore it’s not a legend or a story,” said Rhea, looking right at Jade, “it all happened for real, which makes it all the worse.”

Dancing candle flames caused shadows to flicker all around the room. This is great, thought Jade. A creepy true story late at night. The walls in Rhea’s room were covered in strange pictures of mountains and forests. One, in particular, was a woodland scene, set very late in the evening, with both full moons out, and stars glittering brightly in the night sky. Jade thought the pictures made the atmosphere in the room even more mysterious. Rhea continued.

“Anyway, almost two and a half thousand years ago, there were three great kingdoms, all existing at the same time. Now, these kingdoms decided to join together at one point, to form a sort of single cooperative super-kingdom that covered much of the south-eastern continent of Ibtannia, as well as the landmass of Klone, below our continent of Sephar. The people living in it called it the ShipYard Tridom.”

“Why that name?” asked Menonn.

“Oh, the original three kingdoms all grew out from cities with large ship-building yards in them. Now this super-kingdom carried on successfully for the next few

hundred years and brought a long period of peace and prosperity. Probably the longest golden age in the whole of Mi-Rethyn history.”

“It sounds wonderful. But something went wrong didn’t it?” implied Brandon cunningly, knowing something must have gone awry since there was no super cooperative kingdom around now that he knew of.

“Well according to the history books, the ShipYard Tridom was always ruled by three kings, each descended from the three ruling families of the founding smaller kingdoms,” said Rhea.

“Weren’t there any queens?” piped in Jade.

“A few,” answered Rhea, “but mainly kings did the governing in those days. The thing is, at some point, a group of nobles from a small city called Loke, right on the eastern edge of the Tridom’s realm, discovered a huge gold and metal ore mine almost directly under their feet. These nobles, and their mining friends, then had a big argument with the three ruling kings. And soon after, they fell out altogether, having decided there was no way in which the Tridom was to have any more of the hoards of money they were making.”

“Why not?” asked Jade.

“Because they wanted to, you know, keep it all for themselves perhaps,” answered Brandon, in a silly kind of voice. “That just might be the reason, don’t you think?”

Now it was Jade who gave Brandon a nasty look.

“Go on,” said Menonn, who was sitting on the bed in Rhea’s room, “this is interesting. I’ve not heard this story before.”

Rhea tried to continue.

“It’s not a story remember, this is history, not legend or made up. Right, the mine owners, using the vast wealth they

were just digging out of the ground, bought the whole of the city they lived in, and renamed it Megron, in honour of Megrous, some really ancient god of mines and metal. You’ll hear something about him if you do the ‘Gods and Beliefs’ course. This renaming from Loke to Megron was actually supposed to be a joke according to the history books.”

“I’m sure I’ve heard that name before,” said Brandon, who suddenly started taking a more serious interest. “Isn’t Megron an old name for that massive area we now call the Ibtannian Wasteland?”

A map of Ibtannia was also hanging up in Rhea’s room. It was a truly vast area of rocky desert.

“Yes, it is,” answered Rhea. “Anyway, what started off as a joke by the miners and nobles became more and more serious. Over the next couple of hundred years, many of the mine owners slowly began to believe Megrous did in fact exist, and he’d given them this vast wealth so they could build him a huge temple, and worship him as their god. Therefore, having already broken their city away from the ShipYard Tridom, they then built the Great Temple of Megrous out of the black granite that made up the rocks in that area. Once constructed, this temple came to dominate the entire city of Megron.

Next, things got even more serious as they set up ‘The Megron Academy of Dark Magic’ in the belief that they could use black magic, and other dark powers, and what have you, to defend themselves, and more importantly, their money, against the ShipYard lot. So, slowly but surely, an empire began to extend from this city, and those running it decided to call it the Megronian Realm.”

“Black magic?” said Brandon slowly. “There are still some schools of that today, in certain places, aren’t there?”

“Yes, but the history books say that this academy was enormous, with thousands and thousands of students,” replied Rhea.

“Bet it wasn’t as good as the RiftWood Academy,” piped in Jade, while eating more toffee.

The others smiled. She was right there. Nothing was as good as their RiftWood School.

“Well those ruling the ShipYard Tridom at the time, King Riduran, King Blenek and a queen, Queen Nephri, thought this dark academy to be a mortal threat to their very existence,” said Rhea, glancing at Jade on the word ‘queen’, and smiling. “They were so worried, that they sent their best spies into Megron to find out what sort of things might be going on. The spies slowly discovered many secrets, including the existence of certain strange and brightly coloured heavy metals. Eventually, they even managed to steal a few objects fashioned from said metals, and smuggle some back to the ShipYard lands. That’s where Ashterrie thinks the red heavy metal candlestick, that we’ve all seen, originally came from. It was stolen right out of the old city of Megron!”

“Oh my!” said Brandon.

Menonn and Jade looked at each other in amazement.

“Come on them,” said Brandon. “Tell us more!”

“Right. Once back in the ShipYard ruling city of Salomane, the two kings, Riduran and Blenek, plus Queen Nephri, came up with this idea to counteract all the magic of Megron. They first noticed the candlestick had three ships on it, and so assumed it must have been made as a fitting emblem to

represent the ShipYard Tridom. Now, history goes on to say that given the desperate situation, they were in, both the kings and the queen next constructed a fabulous triangular throne table, called the Thricron. It was covered in heaps of gold and silver and gemstones and was placed in the vast throne room of Salomane.

Then, in a great long ceremony, these three rulers sat at the three sides of the Thricron table, and called on every nice and good god they could think of, to infuse all their will to survive into the column of the candlestick, and so try and keep their ShipYard Tridom super-kingdom going, against the growing might and power of the Megronian Realm.

The idea was that, if the candlestick represented the kingdom, then with all the power of all these gods combined within it, the existence of the ShipYard Tridom would be forever guaranteed. I think they were hoping that just as candles are used to give light in dark places, so the Tridom would always be a source of hope against the darkness all around.”

The candles in this room certainly give out lots of light, thought Jade, looking around at them.

“So you reckon the candlestick we have is the very same one!” said Menonn, almost livid with excitement.

“And before we found it thrown down a well, you’re saying it was sitting on this Thricron throne table, the very ruling centre of the greatest and most powerful kingdom in the whole of Mi-Rethyn history!” said Brandon incredulously.

Rhea nodded.

“Weren’t the mine owners most upset about having all their coloured metal, and other secrets, stolen from right under their noses by Tridom spies?” then asked Menonn.

“They were more than angry,” said Rhea, “and so the Megron Academy of Dark Magic got itself together, and began to make a determined effort to forever destroy the ShipYard Tridom by using every form of magic they could possibly come up with. It’s said all kinds of terrible things were planned and done within the Academy’s black walls.”

“What things?” asked Jade.

“The teachers wouldn’t say,” said Rhea quietly. “But they said they were really horrible.”

“Who won this magical battle then?” asked Brandon with interest.

“I was just getting to that,” said Rhea. “Now, in time, when the Tridom spies reported back as to what was going on in the Megron Academy, the ShipYard people decided to put an end to the Megronian Realm once and for all. However, rather than resort to magic, they decided to use more direct methods. Therefore the entire ShipYard army was called up, along with their huge navy, and together they all set off to conquer the city of Megron in a great battle. The history books say over four and a half million men marched out over the landmass of Ibtannia, and a fleet of over two-thousand warships set sail in an easterly direction along what is now the Pithion Strait. It was the biggest invasion force in history ever.”

“Wow! That must have been something,” said Brandon. “Four million on the march!”

“Did it work?” asked Jade excitedly.

“Not really. Before the ShipYard army managed to get close to their target, something even worse happened. What we now call the Mace of Hell came from the sky and smashed into our world, only a few days’ horse ride from the great city of Megron. After that, the heavens went dark for ages and ages, and the whole of Mi-Rethyn ended up in what is now referred to as the Aeon of Dark Mist. That then lasted for the next eight-hundred years.”

“Gosh!” exclaimed Menonn, who at least had heard of the Dark Mist, but hadn’t known much about it.

Jade had heard about the Dark Mist for the first time only that morning, back in the library.

“Why was it called the Dark Mist?” she then asked.

“The black granite that filled the ground, both in and around and under the city of Megron, was blasted up into the sky as fine dust, and soon spread over all the world. Dark grey clouds filled the heavens, making it night nearly all the time, and endless black rain poured from the sky. At times even the air was hard to see through, so people called it the Dark Mist. It’s said the whole of Mi-Rethyn was covered in black dust and ash for years and years on end. Every field, beach, wood, hill, mountain, and every sea was nearly black in colour. It was just horrible.”

“What happened to Megron and all those armies?” asked Brandon.

“They got blasted to cinders. Even today you can go to the continent of Ibtannia, way down south, and see where the Mace of Hell hit. It’s a crater about one and a half thousand storeys deep, with a massive black water lake at the bottom. In books, they say nothing lives or grows there. Instead, twisted rock

formations tower hundreds of storeys into the air for days' of horse riding all around. It's supposed to be the weirdest and most alien place in the whole of the world."

"So every one of those soldiers died?" asked Brandon.

"They all died," said Rhea sadly, remembering how cheerless she'd felt when she first heard all this terrible history in class. "All four and a half million of the ShipYard soldiers perished, and all two thousand of their ships were sunk. Everyone in the Megron Academy of Dark Magic was killed, and all the people in the city of Megron were wiped out too, as was everybody else for hundreds of stratoms in all directions. The history books go on to say, that across the world, about a hundred-million people may have died in the wars, starvation, famine and disease that followed.

"A hundred-million people died!" cried out Menonn. "Are you certain? There aren't that many people in all the world today, surely?"

"There were more people then," said Rhea.

"What about the Tridom?" asked Jade.

"Amazingly the Tridom survived. Or at least its three core cities did, Salomane, Dreneth-Nyca, and of course Fendrak, which is still here today. Since they are near the equator line of our world, they got more of what little sunlight was left, and so people could still just about grow food or catch a few fish in the murky seas of those days. That's when the Tridom became known as 'The Enduring Cities' since people looked to them for the future. They were the only real civilisation left at the time, but I was told it was just awful to live then, and we should be so grateful things are different now," said Rhea.

"Well I'm glad I wasn't around," stated Menonn.

Jade nodded in agreement. The idea of living on a black world was just horrible. She suddenly felt ever so sorry for all the poor children who'd had no choice but to grow up during those terrible times.

"Didn't they see this Mace thing coming, and think about running for cover?" asked Brandon. "I would have."

"History books say people could see the Mace of Hell coming for many days, as a bright red object in the heavens. But the people of the ShipYard Tridom thought it was a magical object put in the sky by the Dark Academy of Megron. And the citizens of Megron thought the ShipYard lot had managed to cook up some magic of their own and conjure this strange sight in the skies themselves. So they all ended up blaming each other for what was going on and decided the huge war they were about to fight would be the best way to sort it all out. Looking back, it was all complete madness, and both sides ended up dying."

"What a horrible story!" exclaimed Jade. "I'm glad they don't do things like that anymore."

"I told you it wasn't very nice," said Rhea.

"So let me get this straight once again," said Menonn in a serious voice. "Our candlestick comes from the one and only evil city of Megron, and just happens to be the very same one the kings and queens of the ShipYard Tridom used, to try and keep their super-kingdom going."

"So Mr Ashterrie thinks," said Rhea.

"But that's just incredible!" said Brandon.

"And is it really magical, with all that power from all those gods, who were called on to give it the will to survive?" asked Jade.

“Well of course not!” exclaimed Brandon. “If it were, the ShipYard Tridom would still be here!”

Rhea ignored Brandon and spoke to Jade.

“Who knows? You could never prove it I suppose, but the story of the Enduring Cities and how they survived the Aeon of Dark Mist and changed into the world we know now, is fascinating stuff,” replied Rhea.

“But what was this great candlestick doing at the bottom of a dry well!” asked Brandon in disbelief.

“I don’t know,” answered Rhea, “and I wish I did. Look, it’s really late and we can carry on talking about this tomorrow. Let’s call it a night.”

Jade, Menonn and Brandon reluctantly left Rhea’s room and headed for their own. Menonn paused at Rhea’s door, however, and looked back.

“You know what?” he said quietly. “I wonder if we’re going to regret finding that candlestick. Something that important is bound to have trouble following it all the way down through history to our time.”

“Maybe that was the reason it got dropped down a well,” said Rhea thoughtfully. “Perhaps someone just wanted to be rid of it.”

“Or someone hid it there, and planned to pick it up at a later date,” said Menonn.

“Which means if anybody knew it was here, in our school, then we could all be in great danger,” suggested Rhea quietly.

“Not a very nice thought to go to bed on,” said Menonn.

“Not really, no,” said Rhea.

Menonn left the room, walking with the help of his cane. Rhea sat down on her bed. The candles continued to burn and

flicker in their little holders all around her. She was tired but didn’t like going to bed when her mind was disturbed.

When Rhea first found the candlestick, it was a dream come true for the young treasure hunter. She was the talk of the school, and never could she have hoped to find anything more beautiful in all of Mi-Rethyn than the red metal object. Now though, Rhea felt uneasy. She liked adventures and mysteries but this one was getting more than a little deep. All these connections with dark and horrible events of long ago gave her the creeps. Why couldn’t this candlestick of been the start of a nice adventure, she wondered.

An image of the midnight-blue tiara floated into Rhea’s mind. And that was another thing that bothered her. Why were these images and sensations coming into her head every now and then? She had no answer. The image remained in Rhea’s mind. They knew nothing about the tiara, Rhea realised, nothing at all. Just as you know nothing about the significance of the blue julnave playing piece she considered. Now her head was starting to spin. Tiaras and blue princesses. Tiaras and blue princesses. Perhaps they would be the ones to take her on a more enjoyable adventure or quest. So trying to hold that nicer thought in her head, she went to bed and went to sleep.

- Chapter 11 -
Lemon Drops and Invisible Cabbage

Hundreds of forest trees swayed gently in the light breeze, as dozens of bees hummed over the meadow grass, travelling in all directions from daisy to buttercup to daisy. High up on slender branches, several brightly coloured birds were trying to sing in perfect melody. While not far off, a narrow brook bubbled gently under a small wooden bridge. And high in the clear blue sky, a bright yellow sun cast its abundant warmth over the whole scene.

Soon a young girl wandered out of the meadow, passed under the shade of several silver birches, and then headed out onto the simple plank bridge. Pausing at the centre of the crossing, she leaned over the moss-covered railing and gazed below at the flowing water, her mind full of idyllic thoughts. Presently an oldish man holding a stick came the other way. He was humming quietly to himself.

“Good day to you Miss,” said the old man, touching his hand to his floppy hat as he reached Jade.

“Isn’t this place just wonderful,” said Jade in a dreamy sort of way. “I wish everywhere could be this nice.”

“Yes, it’s a perfect day. Perhaps you would care for a lemon drop?” asked the old man. “That would make it even more perfect don’t you think?”

“Why those are my favourite sweets!” exclaimed Jade, taking one thankfully.

“I know,” said the old man quietly.

Jade was soon sucking on the sweet. It tasted of perfect lemon. The old man was right. The perfect day was now even

more perfect. However, something wasn’t quite right here. The trees, the birds, the bees. It was just like high summer. But it’s only spring, thought Jade. I know that.

“How did you know I liked lemon?” she asked, a few moments later.

“I know everything about you.”

“Oh,” commented Jade, as if it were perfectly normal for someone to know everything about you.

“You’re the girl who found the runes at the sad castle,” stated the old man.

The brook below continued to bubble slightly as it ran over some large stones in its course. Miniature whirlpools appeared from time to time upon its surface, caused by water flowing over the rock ledges that made up the streambed. Jade’s mind snapped into gear. This just couldn’t be real. But it certainly felt like it.

“Where is this place?” she asked the old man presently.

The old man looked around slowly as if to encompass everything.

“This world is called Daffcrillin. It’s very nice here, especially in summer.”

Now Jade knew none of this was real. She’d never heard of another world, let alone one named Daffcrillin.

“This isn’t a place, it’s a dream,” she then said, more to herself than to the old man.

But not like any dream she’d ever had before though. It was far too nice. Felt far too real. The two of them stood for a while longer, enjoying the peace and tranquillity.

“So why are you here then?” asked Jade of the old man.

“I came to see you.”

“What for?”

“I like your company, unless you wish me to leave of course,” said the old man.

Jade thought for a moment. The old man seemed nice enough, and he had given her a sweet. However, she suddenly remembered that many people had told her many times before, to never ever take sweets, or anything else, from strangers. A bit late for that now, she thought, but perhaps it didn't matter if you were in a dream. She then remembered the old man had mentioned the sad castle and the runes. If there was one thing she wanted, then it was to know what the runes really meant.

“Can you read the symbols I found?” she asked hopefully.

“Oh yes,” said the old man.

“What do they mean?”

“They're a warning.”

“A warning? About what?” asked Jade in surprise.

“About something extremely dangerous, but also extremely exciting,” answered the old man.

Just then, a blue dragonfly hovered near Jade for a few moments, before darting off into the long grass growing along the brook bank.

“Yes, but what exactly are they a warning of?” asked Jade, a little perplexed now.

“Something you've never heard of,” replied the old man.

“How do you know?” said Jade, now getting really puzzled.

“I know everything about you, remember,” said the old man calmly. “I know what you do know, and I also know what you don't know.”

Jade thought for a moment. The story Rhea had told that evening had been full of dangerous and evil things. Perhaps the runes were connected with those.

“Are they about Megron?”

“No. You've heard of the Megronian Realm. The runes concern things you know nothing about. Dangerous and exciting things,” said the old man simply. “Some worse than Megron.”

Worse! Jade shuddered. The events surrounding Megron, the ShipYard Tridom, and the Aeon of Dark Mist, were about the most horrendous story she'd ever heard. Jade looked with alarm at the old man.

“How could they be about something worse? That stuff about Megron was just terrible,” said Jade rather shocked.

“I agree. Megron and the Aeon of Dark Mist were awful.”

“But if something even worse is coming then what are we all to do?” blurted out Jade with real concern. “You must stop it! You must!”

She realised after she'd said it, that a single old man, with a floppy hat and a stick, would probably have no idea of how to stop great and awesome events such as those surrounding the Dark Mist. Oh well.

“Sorry,” said Jade. “I just think it would be nice if someone could prevent a coming disaster.”

The old man nodded.

“Yes, it would. But there are forces on your world of Mi-Rethyn, and various people as well, who have no interest in preventing anything,” said the old man.

“Can't anyone stop them then?” asked Jade in hope. “Surely someone could try.”

Several brightly coloured fish then swam under the bridge. The old man paused to bend over and watch them pass. Weaving between one another as they travelled along, the fish made a great-looking team.

“I will stop them,” he said finally. “I’m building an empire.”

“What good will that do?” asked Jade, an unsure look now on her face.

She shook her head. Just now everything had been lovely. Now she was having a complete nightmare! Standing outside on a perfect sunny day, sucking sweets and practically talking about the end of her own world!

“Where will this empire be then? Is it going to be near our school?”

“It’s going to rule everywhere,” said the old man.

Now Jade was really concerned. An empire that ruled over everything. What a ghastly thought!

“Where will I live then?” she asked in dismay. “I don’t want to be made homeless by a rampaging empire!”

The old man straightened up from looking over the bridge at the coloured fish.

“As I said, my empire will be everywhere. So you’ll be living in it.”

“But I don’t want to live in an empire. I want to stay at RiftWood,” said Jade fearfully.

“This empire is not what you think.”

“I don’t care. I still don’t want to live in an empire. Empires are horrible. They just cause lots of war and fighting!” said Jade rather strongly.

“True. But this one will be like none that’s ever been.”

Jade wasn’t at all convinced about that. She looked down sadly at the wooden planks that made up the bridge. A couple of beetles ran quickly from one side of the bridge to the other. Their small legs were almost a blur to look at. This was turning into a really strange dream.

“You like adventures and mysteries don’t you?” asked the old man suddenly.

“Yes,” replied Jade, still feeling sad, but glad the conversation had changed subject.

“Well, the one you’re in at the moment is a very deep mystery indeed,” said the old man looking up, as several large white birds flew overhead.

“Is it dangerous?” asked Jade almost by impulse.

“Very dangerous. But also very exciting. As I told you, the runes are a dire warning.”

Oh dear, thought Jade. She was beginning to not like the sound of this one little bit. She didn’t like scary things. Scary books yes, but not scary things in real life.

“But I can’t read them. How can I understand a warning if I can’t even read it?” she asked, thinking that a very intelligent question.

“You can’t. But soon you’ll meet someone who can.”

“Why don’t you just tell me?” asked Jade almost in a petulant tone. “I bet you know exactly what the runes mean.”

The old man smiled. This Jade had spirit and persistence.

“Then it wouldn’t be a mystery, would it?” he said with a twinkle in his eye.

“That’s not fair!” she exclaimed.

“Fair? I tell you more about the future than most people will ever know, and you say it’s not fair! My dear girl, some

people spend all their lives trying to discover the future and get lost in a hopeless fog of their own making.”

That was true, thought Jade. She’d heard of all kinds of fortune-tellers and card-readers and soothsayers, but most of them couldn’t even predict the weather, let alone anything important. If anybody was lost in fog, it was them.

“I’m sorry. I just really want to know what the runes mean,” she said, trying to remain calm.

“Don’t worry. You will.”

The old man picked up his stick, ready to head off.

“Now you must excuse me, Miss Vixoe, I have various matters to attend to.”

About to leave, he turned to Jade one last time.

“Perhaps you would like the rest of my lemon drops. I’ve plenty more elsewhere.”

Despite all the warnings Jade had ever heard about taking things from strangers, she felt it safe to accept the bag of sweets. The old man then wandered off into the meadow beyond and was soon lost among the forest trees.

“How totally odd,” thought Jade out loud.

All this talk of dangerous warnings and empires covering the world had rattled her a bit. But soon the sound of whispering leaves, humming bees, twittering birds, and the gentle bubbling of the brook calmed her right down.

Never mind about the old man’s empire. The perfect day was now better than ever. A whole bag of lemon drops. Heaven!

It was later than usual when Jade finally woke up. Must have been that long group talk last night, with the others in Rhea’s room, she thought. If you stay up late then you get up

late. That’s what her parents had often told her. How right they were.

Glimpses of a half-remembered dream flickered through Jade’s memory. What had that been all about? Something concerning dangerous runes, lemon drops, and weird talk about an empire. Dangerous runes? I’m trying to unlock the meaning of some runes, Jade thought. Perhaps I’m overdoing it, and that’s why they’re now cropping up in my dreams. I should stop. But Jade was more desperate than ever to know what the runes meant.

She got up and looked about her room. It was the same room she’d gone to sleep in. The yellow candlesticks were still by her bedside. Parchments, a quill pen, and an abacus lay on her table. All her storybooks filled the shelves. RiftWood School was still here. She vaguely remembered being worried about not being able to live in the school anymore for some reason. Must have been that dream again. Try and forget about it, thought Jade. The whole thing was probably nothing important anyway. You have a breakfast to eat and work to do.

Brandon spent all morning beavering away in the kitchen, trying to make it up to Salice for nearly chopping her head off the previous evening. He scrubbed tables and scrubbed pots and polished pans and washed plates and cleaned hobs and even gave the floor a good wipe over. Hardly the sort of thing great adventurers should be doing, thought Brandon sadly, but I suppose I ought to help Salice out for at least one day. Kallijine thought it was great seeing someone male do all the work for a change!

However, at first, Salice wasn't the least bit impressed with Brandon's attempt to win back her friendship. She was having none of it. Gradually though the girl softened, and by the time Brandon left, she was at least prepared to admit that maybe the incident involving the axe-head had been an accident after all. But, in her eyes at least, Brandon was still a complete idiot for not knowing what he was doing.

Lunch was good today, thought Menonn. Some nice juicy sausages, plenty of green beans, and loads of potatoes baked in spicy jucider oil. All followed by blueberry pie and rich tasty custard. The RiftWood kitchen staff certainly knew their stuff!

"Shame about there being no cabbage on the menu though," remarked Menonn, his mouth full of potato.

Brandon kicked him under the table.

"That was my bad leg I'll have you know!" said Menonn, almost choking on his food.

"Don't worry Menonn. When the goblins come for Brandon, to get their shield back, he can beg for his life by swapping it for a sack of cabbages, and then everything will be back to how it was!" offered Rhea.

By now Brandon was starting to get rather tired of ruined cabbage jokes, smashed tool shed jokes, and in fact, any jokes taken at his expense. Jade came over, having eaten lunch with another of her friends. If she says anything at all, I'll blow my top, thought Brandon. Fortunately, Jade was thinking about other things.

"Thanks for the lemon drops, whichever one of you put them in my room after morning coffee, they were delicious!" she said, with a smile on her face.

Rhea, Menonn and Brandon all looked at each other. None of them had given Jade any sweets, though they all knew she liked lemon-flavoured treats.

"Must have been someone else," said Brandon. "We don't have a key to your room."

Jade looked puzzled.

"Can't think who," she said, suddenly realising her room had been locked all morning.

"Come on, let's get to the library," said Rhea. "I want to go down into that basement and see what we come up with."

"What an excellent idea!" said Brandon. "Why I do believe that as soon as Menonn finishes his cabbage, we can all get back to work!"

Jade looked at Menonn's plate and then looked even more puzzled. First sweets that appeared out of nowhere, and now invisible cabbage!

"It's not worth worrying about," Rhea said to her. "It really isn't."

- Chapter 12 - Ancient Anvils

The four friends gathered three levels underground, in the candle-lit section of the library. The lowest floor was still beneath them, but the old astronomy books were all stacked here. Even Menonn had decided to struggle down the iron steps this time to be a part of what was going on.

Miss Kyrith, whose first name was Hellenn, was waiting for them. She was very clever, though not particularly old, twenty-five summers perhaps, and was an expert on all things astronomical. However, she wasn't the sort to go wandering around the world looking for treasure, or the trouble that often went with it. No, she much preferred to teach and help students with their work and leave the real-life exploring to others, while she lived quietly and happily in one of the local villages.

"Most of our books about the Aeon of Dark Mist, and the awesome events that led up to it, are stored along here," said Miss Kyrith waving her hand along one particular shelf.

Jade looked wide-eyed at the dusty books and other interesting objects that were lurking down in these depths. Hellenn pulled a very old-looking carved wooden tube out of a box and took the top off it. Inside was a truly ancient map, thousands of years old. She laid it carefully over a clean polished table. The four great bronze candlesticks that stood at the table corners, resembled tall imperial guards standing to attention, thought Rhea. Hellenn lit the eight candles on them and gathered the children about the map. Shadows from the candles danced around the room. Just like last night, thought Jade.

"A map like this is a great treasure you know," said Miss Kyrith, her voice low. "Many people would love to see what you're about to see."

None of the children doubted Miss Kyrith for a moment. Crowding round, they looked on intently. It was a very ornate wax-coated map of the heavens. But it looked nothing like a modern astronomical map. The constellation patterns were very different, as were the names of the stars, all of them coming from another age, another time.

"Is this map really as old as the Aeon of Dark Mist?" asked Rhea.

"I like to think so," said Hellenn. "It was found in the city of Fendrak, one of the old Tridom cities, so it could well be."

"Wow!" said Menonn. "It's like looking at another world."

"In many ways, it is another world. Many things were different before the Mace of Hell came," said Hellenn.

"That group of stars over there doesn't look right," pointed out Brandon. "They would be the Javelin now, but it looks very bent here."

The others agreed.

"Couldn't they draw maps in those days?" asked Menonn.

"Yes they could," answered Hellenn, smiling, "but you are forgetting the stars move ever so slowly with time, each one going its own way. This is how the sky looked before the Dark Mist came. Notice the star Candus here?"

Miss Kyrith pointed at a yellow dot on the map.

"Today, as we know, it would be about here," Hellenn said pointing again, "near the red star Brothech. It's moved quite a long way."

The children looked on amazed.

“That’s really something!” exclaimed Rhea. “Fancy seeing stars actually walk across the heavens.”

Brandon looked for the star pattern he now knew so well. It didn’t take him long, not this time. The six stars on his shield could be seen, all together, along with two others that had rusted off the shield long ago. According to the map, the ancient name for this star group was the Anvil.

“There you are!” said Brandon, his voice full of triumph. “That explains the anvil symbol on my shield, as well as the stars. Now we’re getting somewhere, and at least there are no nasty green goblins around this time!”

“What’s the story behind that constellation?” asked Rhea to Hellenn.

“More goblins I hope,” said Jade, glancing quickly at Brandon.

Hellenn wandered slowly along a shelf, looking carefully up and down at various book titles as she went. She had to stand on a stool, and reach up to a higher level, to get down the one they wanted. It was a book so dusty, you could have believed a pot of grey flour had been tipped over it. Its pages were brown around the edges and made a crinkling noise as you turned them. The thing was stuffed full of truly ancient star legends. Hellenn soon found the one they were interested in.

“Are you ready? It’s written in really old language, so I’ll have to try and translate it as best I can. Looks like it goes on a bit though. Are you sure you want to hear all this?” asked Hellenn.

All the children nodded eagerly. Thus Hellenn started her translation.

“The myth behind the constellation of the Anvil. Right, according to ancient lore, in the early days of the world, there was another race of talking beings around called the kobern, or goblin race.”

“Oh no! Not more goblins!” moaned Brandon. “Why do horrible slimy green goblins keep coming into all this?”

Miss Kyrith looked at Brandon a little annoyed.

“Sorry Miss,” he then said respectfully.

Looking back down, Hellenn carried on.

“Now goblins are less powerful than men and so were oppressed by the normal people of that time, who treated them very badly. In fact, things got so awful the poor goblins had to either live as slaves or eke out a living in faraway places to escape persecution.

One day, while all this was going on, a young goblin boy called Yilven Fraxleve decided he was finally fed up with the race of men. Thus he and a group of friends agreed to embark on a great and fantastic quest to find the gods and ask for their help. After many trials, tribulations, and great dangers, they eventually sought out the gods in their fantastic residential palace. Yilven complained to them, there and then, about the way men treated his people so badly, and how there was nothing the goblins could do about it.

However, the gods took no notice of Yilven, and told the goblins, in very plain language, that many animals and other creatures suffered terribly at the hands of men, and goblins were no different. This was just the way of things, and the silly old goblins would just have to cope with it all as best they could.

Having come on such a long hard journey to simply hear this, made the goblin friends all very angry! In their rage they completely forgot where they were, and ran into the great banquet hall of the gods, overturning tables, smashing up chairs, and throwing food and wine all over the walls. Soon the place looked as if a wild, wild party had been taking place for days on end! This made the gods burn with fury and they decided to set themselves against the goblin race and punish them far worse than men ever could. Thus huge lightning bolts, and great fiery stones, began to fall from the heavens in all the places where goblins lived. So all across Mi-Rethyn, the goblin people lived in even greater misery than before.

Yilven and his friends, seeing they were in a worse state than ever, despaired of everything. Then another god wandered onto the scene. Unlike the others, he at least listened to Yilven and agreed it was bad for men, and even for other gods, to oppress the goblins as they did. Yilven called him the lone-god, since he didn't seem to associate with any of the other gods, but acted quite alone.

This lone-god pointed out to Yilven, that long ago, men had been given dominion over the whole world of Mi-Rethyn, and this was why the race of men was so powerful, and could so easily rule over all other animals and living creatures in whatever way they liked. Furthermore, the lone-god also informed Yilven there was no way in which men, or the other gods, could ever be weakened. To do so would destroy the natural order of things.

The goblins moaned with dismay and howled like wild dogs when they heard all this, and Yilven said "it would be better to die than try and live against the power of men and gods!"

But the lone-god took pity on the poor goblins and said he would do two things for them. First, he produced a great anvil and placed it in a vast underground cavern, and upon this anvil, over time, he taught the goblin friends many great secrets in the use and understanding of metal. The lone-god told Yilven this would help them in their struggle against men. The goblin boy and his friends were thankful for the anvil they'd been given, and also thanked the lone-god for taking the time to teach them all the secrets of metal they'd learned.

"If we could, we would use our new skills to make weapons," he said, "and then we'd defend ourselves against the evils of men. But how can we? This anvil is far too large, and far too heavy, for us to take back home! All our knowledge is therefore useless."

The lone-god smiled, if a god could smile, and told Yilven he'd made a good point. So the lone-god told the goblins he would take their anvil and cast it into the stars as a constellation. That way its secrets would always be available to the goblins, even on the ordinary anvils they had back in their cavern homes. Furthermore, the lone-god said the constellation of the Anvil would be the one part of the sky that belonged exclusively to the goblins, and would forever guarantee their existence as a race.

Yilven and his friends said the new constellation looked very nice, but they really had to be getting back to their people, and teach them the secrets of metal so they could survive against the race of men. The lone-god understood and wished them well. So Yilven and his friends left the underground cavern and returned to the normal world. Using their new secrets, they soon had goblin forges producing vast numbers of

weapons, such as swords, axes, maces, spears, daggers, and everything else you could think of. And with these weapons began the great goblin wars, which raged on for hundreds of years across the southeastern continent of Ibtannia. The race of men were still more powerful, but at least the goblins could protect themselves from violent attack.

However, one day, several years into the first of these goblin wars, Yilven remembered the lone-god had said he would do two things for the goblins. Giving them the Anvil, and the secrets of metal, had been one. What was the other? Wanting to find out, Yilven journeyed all the way back to see the lone-god, so he could ask him.

The lone-god was happy to see Yilven Fraxleve a second time and said the other thing he had for the goblin race, was a share in a great empire that would come into being in the future.

“Of what possible use is that?” asked Yilven.

The lone-god said this empire would not be built by either men or goblins, or even by the other gods, but he would do it himself. In addition, unlike previous empires, it would not weaken or die, but once incepted, it would stand forever. And within it, both goblins and men would rule as friends with equal power.

Also, said the lone-god with a twinkle in his eye, this empire would declare war on all the other gods who’d treated the goblins so badly, and would eventually flatten them. They would be cast aside like smelly domestic rubbish, as the great empire slowly grew and grew, and came to rule over, not just the whole of Mi-Rethyn, but over every other world, every star, every magical kingdom, and every dark hidden dominion that

ever was, or ever could be. This vast empire, it was said, would rise above all others, until none could ever oppress its citizens again.

Yilven listened in awe at all this, but when the lone-god had finished, he said this empire is all too much to be true, and how could anyone ever believe in it? The lone-god thought for a bit and then told Yilven that just to make sure this empire did come to exist, he would set a new star into the sky. One right in the middle of the Anvil constellation, a brilliant blue star called Cobaltus.

So that very evening, Yilven stared deep into the night sky and sure enough, right in the centre of the Anvil shone the new star. Yilven was satisfied and returned home to the goblin lands, to continue defending his people in their war against men, and to wait for the promised empire. The one that would finish off the other gods, who out of spite, were still throwing fiery rocks and bolts of lightning down on the poor goblins whenever they could.

As for the great blue star, Cobaltus, it was said it would shine forever as the star of the goblins, so they could always gaze upon it and look forward to the empire they’d been promised. So ends the ancient legend of the Anvil,” said Miss Kyrith, as she finished translating the old language and looked up at the children.

“That’s some legend,” said Rhea. “One of the best I’ve ever heard.”

For some reason, she felt as if the story was familiar. But how could it be? She’d never heard anything like this before.

“I liked the bit about the goblins getting help,” said Jade, “but that empire sounds a bit scary.”

Brandon went back to looking at the beautiful black map. Right at this moment, he felt as if the whole world was now full of nothing but goblins!

“There it is, the blue star Cobaltus. Right in the middle of the Anvil constellation,” said Brandon, pointing it out to the others.

Menonn also looked carefully at the map.

“That would mean,” he said slowly, “that what the ancients called Cobaltus, is what we call Tanaak or the Sapphire Star in the constellation of the Ring. We heard all about that in the legends of yesterday morning.”

“That’s right,” said Miss Kyrith. “One legend has changed into another, just as the patterns of the stars change slowly with time.”

Rhea thought carefully for a while.

“I wonder why the legends have changed?” she asked. “It would be easier if they didn’t. Then we’d have only one story to worry about, instead of the three we’ve now heard altogether.”

“All legends change with time,” responded Miss Kyrith. “One story just grows into another. That’s always happening.”

“Could someone have deliberately changed the legends?” asked Menonn suddenly. “You know, invent those sillier legends about Cloranus and Juelus and the Ring, in an attempt to keep the one about the goblin empire a complete secret.”

Miss Kyrith thought for a moment.

“I’ve never thought of that, but I suppose it’s possible. Though why someone would want to hide this particular legend and replace it with two others, would be a mystery in itself.”

Hiding legends? What an interesting idea, thought Menonn. Jade meanwhile, was still feeling a bit sorry for the unfortunate goblins she’d heard Miss Kyrith reading about.

“Did goblins ever exist?” she asked.

Brandon and Rhea looked at her and smiled. Poor old Jade, they thought. Goblin legends were one thing. Thinking goblins really existed was quite another, and a bit childish, they reckoned.

“Not that we know of,” answered Miss Kyrith, “but there have been odd reports here and there of strange creatures being seen or caught. You know how it is, people often want to believe in whatever they can. Maybe they did exist, and still do exist, but I doubt if you could ever really know.”

“But we have Brandon’s shield with the anvil on it, and it has the right stars in the right place!” stated Jade. “So there’s a good chance it’s a real goblin shield.”

In fact, Jade was now starting to hope goblins really did exist. She’d read loads of storybooks that were crawling with goblins. In some they were nice, in others they were nasty.

“Good point,” said Hellen. “If it’s not a goblin shield, then it would have to of been made by someone very clever. I can’t believe too many people would know much about ancient legends, from before the Dark Mist, to make a shield like that.”

Now Brandon started thinking. For the last couple of days, he’d heard loads of amusing bosh about goblin legends that he didn’t believe in the slightest. But now things were taking a new turn. His shield and this strange old legend were making this goblin stuff not so easy to ignore. Getting out a piece of paper, Brandon sketched, by the available candlelight, the Anvil stars as they were thousands of years ago. He still wasn’t really

convinced real goblins could be running around the world, somewhere in this day and age. But even the idea of a vast goblin empire coming into being, and then going on to destroy everything else in sight was enough to make his blood run cold.

“Well thanks, Miss Kyrith,” said Rhea. “That’s been really useful.”

“You’re welcome,” she replied, starting to roll the ancient map up and place it ever so carefully back in its wooden tube.

“Now what?” asked Menonn of the others.

Jade shrugged her shoulders. Brandon did the same.

“Candlesticks from Megron, and now a phantom goblin empire to worry about,” said Rhea. “This is all getting a little out of hand.”

“I wonder what we’ll discover next?” mused Brandon.

“Probably a load of fire-breathing dragons living in the Rift Wood or something,” said Menonn, trying to make a joke.

Jade looked around. Suddenly this dark place gave her the creeps.

“Let’s go back up into the light,” she suggested, not wanting to appear to be afraid in front of the others.

“Good idea!” said the other three in unison, who were thinking much the same.

So they all left the basement, their minds full of what they’d just heard. A sense of deep foreboding came over Rhea. This mystery was getting more and more serious. She wondered how long it would be, before bits of it might start crawling off the pages of old books, and start moving out into the real world. The scene of the smashed-up wooden benches and tables in the sad old castle flickered through Rhea’s mind. It reminded her of the bit in the Anvil legend where the goblins

had smashed up the furniture in the palace of the gods. Maybe this empire was already off the pages of certain books and had even now started to move across their world of Mi-Rethyn. How scary was that?

- Chapter 13 - Tunnels of Green Light

The next morning, distant rumbling far to the south made everyone a bit edgy. Purple clouds filled that portion of the sky and forked lightning flashed occasionally from one cloud to another. Glad it's not stormy over here, thought Demos, looking up into the blue sky above RiftWood. He didn't like thunderstorms. They were creepy and always meant something bad was on the way, or so he believed.

Concentrating back on his work, Demos wandered out of the stores carrying a tall pile of wobbling boxes. He walked along carefully, his eyes glancing up nervously, not wishing to see his box tower topple into a heap all across the ground. That would never do. So to get back into the kitchen without being seen, he took a longer way around the school buildings, thus avoiding the ground-floor windows of the main teaching block. This way, if his pile of boxes did topple over, at least there wouldn't be loads of children looking at him when it happened, and giving him lots of cheek later that day!

That was when he noticed a small brown horse standing outside the main school door, nibbling on some grass. Strange, he thought, but then the school often had visitors of various sorts. It was probably nothing.

"That Naylen sure is a good teacher," said Brandon, coming up to Rhea and Jade. "I've learned more swordplay in the last two days than all last term!"

Brandon gave them a bit of a demonstration, swinging and swishing and twisting the weapon he was holding.

"What do you think?" asked the boy, as his blade flashed and spun through the air.

"Not bad. He's pretty good at archery too," said Rhea. "Even Jade here is picking up a few good tricks."

Despite the distant storm clouds, it was a lovely sunny morning, and the children had been outside having a bit of weapons practice on one of the school greens. The world was not a safe place, so at RiftWood, basic weapons training was available to all students. Children were not taught to fight and kill each other, but you never knew when bandits or highwaymen or robbers might cause trouble to an aspiring treasure hunter, later on in life.

Menonn couldn't fight with a sword, or easily use a bow, but he sure knew how to throw a dagger. Naylen had been most impressed with the young man's ability. He joined the others shortly afterwards and they all trooped back into the school.

"Right, I'm hungry, so I'll see you lot later," said Menonn.

"Wait for me, I'm hungry too," chimed in Jade.

So she and Menonn left the others, and headed off through one of the school assembly halls on their way to the kitchen area, hoping to see Salice and maybe get a bite to eat if Mrs Habbit wasn't looking. Rhea and Brandon carried on down the corridor toward the weapons store. Students were not allowed to keep dangerous weapons like swords, daggers, or archery bows in their rooms. So anything that was checked out had to be taken back in good time, there being no exceptions. Demos made quite sure of that.

A few moments later, the peace was torn in two by the most awful high-pitched scream of absolute terror that either

Brandon or Rhea had ever heard. They looked at each other aghast, their faces drained of all colour and complexion.

“Jade!” they both yelled out at once.

Dropping the weapons they were carrying, which then clattered all over the floor, they rushed back toward the hall faster than either had ever moved in their entire lives. Once there, a nightmare of a scene was there to greet them. A short figure gripping a silver-white sword, and dressed in what looked like a midnight-blue cape, was standing a short distance away from Menonn and Jade.

“Stay away! You stay away!” screamed this strange-looking creature, in an even stranger off-key high pitched voice.

Jade’s hands were over her eyes and the girl screamed again in terror, as she huddled behind Menonn. He was holding his black cane tightly in both hands, ready to bash this thing, whatever it was, if it came any nearer. Menonn was also scared out of his wits but there was no way he was going to allow Jade to get hurt, even if it meant certain death for himself.

“What in the world!” cried out Brandon, catching sight of the creature’s face.

Whatever it was, he thought, it didn’t actually belong in this world at all, that was for sure. A wild, rage-filled pale blue face, with eyes like those of a cat, made Brandon’s blood almost freeze solid in his veins. The face looked female, but it hissed at him loudly.

Rhea moved swiftly to where Jade and Menonn were. She grabbed Menonn’s cane and stood facing the attacker. Brandon was by her side almost instantly. The stand-off continued for a few more moments. Then blind panic took over. The short

creature may have had a sword, but as far as it could see, it was outnumbered four to one. It could only see one door out, and in absolute panic headed straight for it.

“Leave me alone! Leave me alone!” screamed the creature in its high-pitched voice as it ran.

However, as soon as it moved, Jade’s mind also snapped, and in sheer panic, she headed at full speed for the same door. Both could only see the door they were determined to get through and neither could see the other. With a sudden shock, they smashed into one another just as they reached the hall exit, and both crashed into door frames, ending up in a complete bundle on the floor.

There were then arms and legs everywhere, and more shouting and screaming! The creature was up first but in its rush to get away, it tripped again over Jade and fell down a second time, its head bashing hard into the floor’s wooden planks. The silver-white sword it still held appeared to thud down right where Jade was, and for a horrible, horrible moment, Menonn, Brandon and Rhea thought that one of their very best friends, and one of the people they all liked most in all the world, had just been cut in two by some foul monster come from the deepest depths of the Abyss.

“No!” screamed Rhea and ran toward Jade.

Brandon got there first, and leaping clean over Jade rushed out into the corridor.

“Stop her!” he screamed to everyone around, as he started chasing the midnight-blue caped figure through the school.

Racing along, he noticed the weapons lying on the floor from a few moments earlier. Brandon skidded to a stop, quickly picked up the sword he’d been practising with that morning,

gripped it tightly in one hand, and then rushed on. Normally Brandon would never, never hit a girl. It just wasn't the done thing. But when he caught up with this one, he was going to cut her head right off! The corridor led into another corridor which led into a third corridor that led straight to the main entrance lobby, and the caped figure swept through the lot like a bolt of blue lightning, to the outside where a small brown horse was standing about nibbling grass. In almost no time, the caped figure mounted the horse, reared around sharply, swung its sword about in the air, and was heading up the driveway at full gallop, clean out of the school.

Brandon moaned in despair as he bashed open doors and rushed through the lobby to the outside, only to see a midnight-blue cape, upon a horse, galloping away beyond the school gate. A moment later Naylen appeared.

"She killed Jade! She killed her!" wailed Brandon, with tears now rolling down his cheeks.

"No she didn't, young man," said Naylen, patting him quickly on the back. "Jade just fainted, she's all right, but we do have to catch that blue cat-girl thing!"

There was no time to saddle a horse. Naylen looked around and saw Flance's old cart standing by the store. Naylen then remembered old Flance saying he'd got some new horses just the day before, to replace his two ageing nags. Just the job!

"Come on," he said to Brandon.

The two of them ran to the cart, jumped on board, and Naylen cracked the whip.

"We're just borrowing this!" he called back, as the cart shot up the driveway with Flance and Demos running out of the stores, shouting after it.

At the top, the cart careered around the gateway. It first went up on two wheels, then came down on all four with a huge clattering bash, and finally headed down the road into the Rift Wood at colossal speed.

"Yah! Yah!" shouted Naylen, whipping the poor horses.

Normally Naylen would never whip a horse, but this was an emergency and he promised himself that he would give each horse a huge bag of sugar cubes, or perhaps a basket of red juicy apples, once this was all over. Brandon just concentrated on holding on for dear life, as the bone-shaking cart thundered down the hill with its deafening rattle filling his ears. Stones and twigs and other debris on the road made the journey even more dangerous. If they smashed into a large tree branch or a small boulder then they'd probably tip over and end up as a pile of matchwood. Racing along, they soon came in view of the crossway where the main Rift Wood road intersects with the one running between Loxrift and Nean. A passenger carriage was headed in the other direction.

"Go right! Go right!" yelled Brandon, pointing madly with the sword he was holding. "That cat thing's gone right! Toward Nean!"

"But what about this carriage in our way!" shouted Naylen back.

"Can't you steer round it?" exclaimed Brandon.

"You what!" cried out Naylen.

The other carriage was getting very close now.

“Not much of a choice now!” said Naylen, gritting his teeth. “You just hold on!”

They screamed into the junction at maximum galloping speed. Naylen managed to swing the cart up on two wheels while also turning it sharply to the right, so they could both change roads and just scrap pass the carriage going the other way, without having to slow down a jot. The raised wheels of Flance’s cart tore along the carriage’s lower paint-work and ripped off its step board. It was a close thing and the sort of driving that would have won a chariot race in the Great Norridon Coliseum.

“Hooligans!” shouted the man on top of the carriage, shaking his fist.

“You belong in stocks, not on the roads!” yelled another man from the carriage’s interior.

The small brown horse was now well on its way to Nean, but fortunately, the road sloped down once more, giving the cart the advantage again. Naylen knew that if they didn’t catch the blue cat-thing soon then Flance’s new horses would be worn out. He decided to give it one last dash and urged the horses on faster. The Rift Wood closed in over the road, so it was soon like racing through a great green tunnel of light, where beams of sunlight danced through the canopy of leaves above you. Branches flashed past Naylen and Brandon, only a hand’s breadth from their faces, as they continued to blast through the countryside.

Soon they were sweeping past the Syanthale Monument. A huge obelisk of grey stone that towered above the surrounding Rift Wood trees. It marked the site of the last great battle in this region, when Earl Cidlus Vaxen had fought against Syrene

Vidyc from the lands to the north, one hundred and ninety-one years ago. Not much time to think about that though.

By now the caped rider was galloping through the centre of Nean’s marketplace, like a mad torrent of water. Folks dived out of the way for cover and hurled numerous insults as it passed.

“Look! It’s getting away!” wailed Brandon. “What can we do!”

“I don’t know,” replied Naylen. “We just haven’t got the speed.”

Just as folk were recovering from that first shock of the caped rider, they now had to contend with Flance’s cart tearing through their marketplace as fast as it could go. They all promptly dived for cover again! However, Flance’s horses were finished, and Naylen knew it. Rather than carry on, he pulled them to a standstill. Now they stood huffing and puffing outside Nean’s coaching yard, just past the marketplace itself.

“This is awful,” complained Brandon bitterly. “We’ll never catch it now.”

Naylen looked around quickly. What was that! His eyes glittered as he saw a team of not two, not four, but a complete set of six black stallions, all harnessed up and waiting to one side of the coaching yard. Some men came running out to see what all the commotion was about.

“Can we borrow those?” asked Naylen, pointing at the set of six horses.

“Borrow them!” said one of the men in disbelief.

“That’s right,” said Brandon suddenly. “We’re from the RiftWood School and we’re chasing a possible murderer! She tried to kill a young girl this morning!”

“A child murderer!” shouted another man, who seemed to be in charge. “We can’t have one of those running around the countryside! Come on men, get to work!”

In almost no time at all, the coach yard men, who knew their stuff, had knocked out the stock pins that connected Flance’s harness to the cart and brought out the team of six stallions. As luck would have it, the new harness fitted Flance’s cart quite easily and with a couple of hefty hammer bashes, the new stock pins were in place.

While they were doing that, Brandon had the bright idea of running over to a market stall, buying some soft lard and using it to grease the axles of Flance’s cart. That should help, he thought. Now they were ready for anything.

“Thanks for your help!” said Naylen. “We’ll bring the horses right back when we’re done.”

“Just you make sure you get ‘em!” said the man in charge, who had three young children of his own, and so certainly didn’t want some child-killing monster on the loose anywhere near this village.

Naylen and Brandon jumped back on board, and Naylen cracked the whip. They were off like the wind in no time. Now there really was going to be no stopping them!

“Unbelievable!” exclaimed Brandon, as he grabbed hold of the cart twice as tightly as before.

The six horses were now at full speed. To them, the cart weighed next to nothing, and all of them ran like horses free in the wild, their manes rippling in the wind. The sound of their hoofs drumming the road, the jingle of the harnesses, and the deafening rattle of the cart, all made it just the greatest and most noisy ride Brandon had ever been on!

Naylen however was struggling to keep them on the road. Driving six horses, as fast as these, was not the same as driving the two very average horses belonging to farmer Flance. The cart veered dangerously from one side of the road to the other, but at least they were absolutely tearing along. Soon the small horse and its rider came into view.

“This time we’ll get her,” said Naylen coldly.

“Not now we won’t! Look! It’s gone left!” screamed Brandon.

Naylen could see that the small horse had indeed gone left, but was struggling to turn his horses the same way. How did you drive a horse team like this? As the road forked, the six horses finally tore down the left-hand route but the cart swung out to the right, smashed through a signpost pointing back to Nean, ripped along a whole load of wooden fencing, and demolished two open farm gates that were in their way too.

“Oh dear!” said Brandon, as the second gate flew past the side of Flance’s cart. “Do you think the farmer will mind?”

“Oh not at all,” said Naylen, still trying to drive in a straight line.

The road levelled out now and the six horses dashed along. They were once again gaining on the cat-like girl. However, a humpback bridge lay ahead of them.

“Oh no!” yelled Brandon.

“Oh yes!” shouted Naylen.

The black horses screamed over the bridge and were pulling the cart so hard that it completely left the ground, on the far side of the bridge’s hump. Brandon and Naylen soared through the air, with their cart, and then all three came down together with an almighty crash! At this point, Flance’s cart lost several

bits of wood, but somehow its wheels all held together. The horses didn't bat an eyelid and just galloped on as if nothing had happened.

"Her horse must be tiring now," yelled Naylen. "We'll get her soon."

"I hope so," shouted Brandon above the roar of the cart. "I can't take much more of this!"

The blue girl looked behind her and could see the cart gaining. She didn't like that. To her, its six black horses may as well have been six black-winged griffins from the fire pits of Krullen. She didn't like the look of the people driving it either. They looked really mad. In addition, her head ached from the bad fall she'd taken back in the school and blue blood had now streaked across her face. She had failed and knew it. She burned with anger that everything was just so unfair. Deciding to gamble on a ride through the woods, where the cart couldn't follow, she left the road and began whizzing between the trees. Normally she could have dodged the branches by sheer skill, but her concentration was gone, and soon enough, one branch struck her hard on the head and knocked her out cold. She flew off the horse and tumbled into some soft ground, her last thought being that at least she'd tried to do something to help her downtrodden people.

"Oh no! We've lost her," exclaimed Brandon in despair, as he saw the small brown horse leave the road.

Naylen pulled the reins on the team of six and the cart gradually shuddered to a standstill. The black horses were tired, but not exhausted, and stood huffing by the side of the

wood. Naylen and Brandon got off. Both were amazed that they and the horses were still alive. Bits of the cart's floor and sides had been falling off all during the trip. Good job the wheels stayed on, Naylen thought.

"That was some trip," he commented.

Brandon was too shattered to speak. This really wasn't what he had planned for today. Presently another horse came charging up to the spot. It was Gallops ridden by Rhea Cantonnell. She hadn't found it too difficult to follow the cart's path of destruction from the school to this point.

"We tried our best, but unfortunately that blue cat-thing's left the road," said Brandon, feeling very weak. "How's Jade?"

Rhea dismounted, also feeling somewhat overwhelmed by recent events.

"I think she's fine. She's not injured, just shocked. Salice is looking after her. What happened here?" asked Rhea, looking into the trees.

"As I said, the wych-cat or whatever left the road and rode at full speed into the wood," answered Brandon.

"Why don't we go in and try and track her?" suggested Rhea.

"Aw! It's probably disappeared by magic or something," said Brandon, "and is back in Hell or wherever such things live."

"It wouldn't go back to Hell without its horse. Look!" said Naylen pointing.

Sure enough, they could all see a small brown horse through the trees.

"Could be a trap," said Brandon.

They waited a few moments, but the horse didn't move. It just bobbed its head up and down as horses often do.

"Let's go in," suggested Rhea. "At least we know what's in there this time."

"Do we?" asked Brandon. "Not too long ago, I never believed in anything. Now, who knows what monsters and horrors are prowling round our world?"

Naylen pulled his silver-white sword out of its scabbard. It was the one he'd shown Mr Ashterrie a few days before.

"That looks just like the one she had!" said Brandon in amazement.

"Exactly," said Naylen. "That's why I'm going in. This is one mystery that's not going to pass me by. Stay close."

The three adventurers carefully stepped into the wood, looking around in all directions as they went. Brandon stepped on a twig and the crack made them all flinch.

"Be more careful!" whispered Rhea.

Eventually, Naylen could make out the blue-caped girl lying on the ground. He pointed her out to the others. They all crept forward like a bunch of desperate robbers, trying very hard not to be seen by anyone at all. Soon enough though, they were standing right over the caped girl, their eyes wide open in complete amazement.

"What a sorry-looking mess," said Naylen, "but hardly a monster from Hell."

"She's really quite beautiful," exclaimed Rhea, getting down next to her. "Or would be. I assume this blue stuff is blood."

"Is she alive?" asked Brandon, who was suddenly no longer so concerned about cutting the girl's head off with the sword he held.

Rhea checked for a pulse, assuming the girl would have a pulse like any normal person. It was still beating. Also, you could see her breathing. Rhea nodded.

"That head wound looks nasty though," she said, getting a small cloth out of her shoulder bag to try and stop the bleeding.

"And we can't leave her here," said Naylen. "If we rip what planks are left off the cart, then we can roll her on them and carry her out this wood. After that, we should get her back to the school. Who she is, and what she is, and where she comes from, can all wait for another day."

The other two agreed without hesitation.

So early that afternoon, Flance's cart rumbled slowly into the school, pulled by Flance's own horses, with Naylen driving and Rhea tending the injured cat-like girl. Brandon followed on Gallops, leading a riderless small brown horse in addition. They decided to take the cart around the back, away from any prying eyes. Naylen went into the school and quietly got hold of Salice and Mr Ashterrie and Mrs Jantill, a very sensible woman who was the chief school nurse. After a short discussion, they judged it best to place the strange girl in a room that was part of the school's quiet eastern wing. Hopefully, that would keep rumours to a minimum while giving her time to recover from being knocked out.

Rumours, however, flew about the school for the rest of the day. It was said that some blood-drinking wych-cat, with blue skin and green horns, had visited from the molten brimstone pits of Hades, to wreak revenge on one of the teachers for stealing some magical treasure fifty years before! But like most rumours, they soon blew over.

Once out of the east wing, Rhea and Brandon just looked at each other. Brandon was holding the blue girl's small, but well-fashioned sword. Its silver-white blade was so much superior to anything the school possessed. No symbol was carved on its hilt, but Brandon thought at once of the ancient Anvil legend.

"I bet it's goblin-forged!" he said, holding the weapon aloft and shaking his head.

Rhea gazed up at the silver-white blade too. Forget about any school prize for treasure hunt find of the year. Forget about the mystery they thought they were getting into. Now, this thing was about to crank up to a new level of seriousness that neither of them had ever encountered before.

- Chapter 14 -
Orange Sweets and Real Leadership

The events of the morning seemed to have drained the life out of the afternoon, for most people, and everyone was trying very hard to do something quite normal.

After a late lunch, Naylen, true to his own word, did in fact get both of Flance's horses some nice apples from the kitchen and helped Demos give them a good rub-down. Then there was the question of Flance's cart.

"Looks like it's been picked clean by vultures," said Flance grumpily, "and now only the bones are left."

Naylen had a look over it.

"The wheels and axles sure held up well though," he commented. "With six good horses, this thing could do some serious racing!"

"That's because they and the crossbeams were part of a naval catapult carriage once upon a time," answered Flance proudly. "My father had a spell on the great warships of WixWyn many years ago, and he was often allowed to take old equipment away when it was replaced."

Naylen was impressed. He would take his hat off to anybody with the guts to go out and do battle against pirates and buccaneers on the high seas.

"Would that be the same story with those barrels we had fun with the other day?" Naylen said, looking at Flance.

Flance smiled. Naylen glanced at the cart again.

"I would be happy to nail a whole load of new planks on for you," he then announced. "I'm sure the school has a good pile of wood lying about somewhere, and Brandon will give me a

hand I'm sure. At least that'll keep him out of trouble for a while."

Flance nodded his approval, so that's what they did. Hence Brandon, who by this stage was getting over the shock of seeing what looked like a spectre from the Abyss cut in half one of his best friends, spent the afternoon hammering nails with Naylen. He also spent a good deal of time drinking the glasses of cool lemon water that Salice brought out for them every now and then.

Jade was taking a little longer to come to terms with the morning's events. Over and over and over again, the details of what happened spinned and spun through her shattered mind. It was like having a huge mass of writhing snakes in your head, with all of them hissing and coiling, their forked tongues darting at you continually. She was lying in her room, where at least the surroundings were familiar. Her bed, her table, and the yellow candlesticks her parents had given her, just before she came to the academy for the first time. At least here, she could try to feel somewhat safer than elsewhere in the school, but it was proving a little difficult at the moment.

The morning's events ran their way through her head yet again. Jade remembered how she and Menonn had stepped into the Birch Hall and noticed a short figure cloaked in a dark blue cape, hood up, turned away from them, over by the high table. The figure seemed to be checking the objects on the table, one by one, but the two children could sense that something was a bit odd. She and Menonn had gone over to investigate, but as soon as the creature realised it was not alone, it spun around in a flash. Then with a sword glinting in

one hand, poised and ready, it screamed out ‘Stay away or else!’ in a high-pitched voice, the like of which neither she nor Menonn had ever heard before. It was seeing the creature’s bluish face, and cat-like eyes, that caused Jade to scream the way she did. After that, it was all a bit of a blur. There was a run to the door, and then this creature was on top of her, then it got up, lunged at her again, and when the sword blade came crashing down to finish her off, she screamed one last time and passed out.

She came to, shortly afterwards, to find Rhea more or less in tears by her side, and far from being dead, she’d got off with just a bruised shoulder and a slightly twisted ankle.

Not very brave are you, Jade then thought to herself. The others all seemed to cope a lot better, but you Jade have let the side down yet again. She felt awful. Even Menonn with his crippled leg had stood his ground, but silly old Jade had once again abandoned her friends when they needed her most, and run clean away. What a useless person you are.

Jade then burst into tears and cried most of the afternoon.

Clarne offered Rhea a sweet.

“Are you sure?” Rhea asked.

“Go on,” said Clarne.

Rhea took a tetrahedral-shaped one out of the beautiful red glass jar Clarne was holding and put it in her mouth. The sweets were made of pure crystal sugar infused with essence of orange. They were very expensive and had a rich, deep flavour to them.

“Umm! These are great,” said Rhea, speaking with her mouth full.

“Well you deserve it,” said Clarne, putting the jar back on a table. “What you did was fantastic!”

“I couldn’t take many more mornings like this one though,” said Rhea, shaking her head. “I thought I was going to be sick.”

“You did great from what I hear,” replied Clarne. “This school will make an adventurer out of you yet!”

“I’ve got quite enough adventure going on as it is,” said Rhea, “and it looks like there’s going to be plenty more to come. And as for that goblin girl, she really is something else.”

“Isn’t she just! Did you see her fingers? The ends are like claws!” chimed in Clarne.

“And those eyes!” exclaimed Rhea.

“And that skin! All pale blue like ice,” said Clarne.

“Her hair looked good though, long and blond. I wouldn’t mind having that,” mused Rhea.

“Come on. You look fine as you are,” responded Clarne.

“Anyway, when did you see our new friend then?” asked Rhea.

“Salice told me about our ‘new friend’ in the east wing a short time ago, so I sneaked off and went to look for myself,” said Clarne with a sly look in her eye.

“Good on you!” said Rhea. “What do you think?”

“Well you’re the one who’s heard loads of myths and legends about goblins recently, but I’ll bet she has a really, really good story to tell,” answered Clarne.

“I wonder if she really tried to kill Jade?” then said Rhea, in a lower, more serious tone.

Clarne thought for a moment. She was a thoughtful kind of girl, who often noticed things that others didn’t, and realised

things others were not aware of. This was one of the reasons Rhea liked her and trusted her.

“I would guess she was probably more scared of us than we were of her,” said Clarne in reply. “I would be, if I was stuck all alone in the world, with a load of odd people not like me.”

Rhea thought back to the morning’s events. Thinking it through, the goblin girl’s bluish face did seem to be more full of fear than anything else, and she’d certainly acted like a petrified animal.

“I hope you’re right,” said Rhea. “If she’s dangerous then I can’t see her being allowed to stay at the school for very long, and I’m starting to really want to meet her.”

There was a pause. Rhea looked around at the collection of keys hanging from the bedroom walls. Clarne was mad about keys and had amassed quite a number over the years. Many were jewelled or forged from precious metals. The goblin girl was doubtless a big key to understanding the mystery they were in. If so, what chance was there of having a conversation with her? Not a lot at the moment, thought Rhea sadly.

The sound of distant thunder, rumbling far to the south, was still echoing about the school from time to time. Clarne glanced out the window. Like many others, she also thought that thunderstorms meant trouble for those who could hear them. But right then she wanted to lift the mood, and encourage Rhea.

“I bet you ten sweets you’ll be best friends with the blue girl in several days!” said Clarne suddenly.

“You’re on, and I hope you win!” exclaimed Rhea, and they clasped hands to seal their wager.

Menonn Topell wasn’t planning on making any friends, with anybody, anytime soon. Every now and then something happened that made him realise that being a cripple wasn’t a good thing to be, and this morning had certainly been one of those times. In fact, he was starting to think, as he sometimes did, that it would have been a lot better all round if he’d just died himself in that dreadful carriage accident three summers ago.

Had the blue creature come for him and Jade right at the start, he felt sure he could have given it a jolly good bash around the head with his black cane before falling over, but that would have been that. He’d felt even more useless when Rhea had grabbed his cane, to face the monster herself, but could see that it made sense for someone with two good legs to do the defending. Some hopeless adventurer you’re going to make when you grow up, Menonn thought to himself gloomily.

Although he’d been sitting in the library all afternoon, he hadn’t done much work but was now certain that Jade’s ‘secret runes’ would turn out to be written in some kind of ancient goblin script. Naylen wandered in looking for him.

“How are you bearing up?” he asked.

“Alright, I suppose,” replied Menonn in a dull sort of voice.

“Alright? I hear that you protected Jade, for a while at least, and stayed calm when all the others were more or less losing their heads,” commented Naylen.

Menonn looked down at the table in front of him. Naylen carried on.

“You know, I won’t pretend to understand what it’s like to be crippled, but I do know a brave heart when I see one, and in my estimation, you young man have a brave heart.”

“What do you mean?” asked Menonn sheepishly.

“Exactly what I said before. Many people can look good running about wielding a sword or whatever, but it’s a rarer kind of man who can keep his head thinking straight in a sudden crisis, and still be able to stay focused afterwards. The others, bless them, have all given up for the day, but you’re still here and still on the job from what I see. That’s a quality needed for real leadership.”

“If you say so,” said Menonn slowly.

“Oh, I do,” said Naylen, “and besides, anyone who can throw a dagger like you has no need to fear for his safety, when he’s older.”

Menonn thought about that for a moment. Perhaps his prospects weren’t quite so bleak after all.

“Thanks,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” replied Naylen.

Once Naylen had left, Menonn decided that hiding in the library behind a load of books like a frightened rabbit, wasn’t a ‘quality of real leadership’, and that he was going to check up on Jade and see how she was.

Late that evening, well after it was dark, Brandon was standing outside on one of the large areas of grass that lay between the school buildings and the Rift Wood trees. Looking toward the school, you could see the candles that had been lit in many of the rooms where pupils had not yet drawn their curtains fully against the night. Looking toward the trees, all you could see were the pitch-black shadows of the Rift Wood.

Brandon headed out slowly toward the trees. He’d often heard people say that at night you could almost hear the trees

whispering to one another, as they shook slightly in the cool gentle wind that often blew from the northeast at this time of year. Tonight was a clear and dark night, and the heavens looked spectacular. As it happened, neither of the Mi-Rethyn moons was out, so it was the turn of the stars themselves to dominate the night sky. Looking up, Brandon searched for the constellations of Cloranus, Juelus, and the Ring. There they were, over to the west, only a little above the trees but clearly visible nonetheless. Just as it said in the modern-day legend, Cloranus was in the middle, making forever sure that Juelus could never get to the Ring. All three would rise higher into the sky as the night went on.

Brandon then tried to make out the old Anvil constellation from the same stars. As Miss Kyrith previously explained, the stars had moved since the time when the old map in the library basement was originally drawn up, but with a bit of effort, you could more or less make out the ancient pattern once more, if you knew what you were looking for. To Brandon’s eyes though, no star was glittering quite so brightly as the whitish-blue Tanaak, often called the Sapphire Star. But of course, that was the name it has nowadays, thought Brandon. He was starting to prefer its old name from before the Aeon of Dark Mist, the name Cobaltus. That name had a presence about it, a sense of something very powerful.

Brandon sighed. A few days ago, he didn’t believe in either goblins or legends. Goblins were just a myth that people spoke about in whispers, as they huddled together around log fires in the middle of winter trying to keep warm. As for legends, they were just nice stories that ancient people had made up, and then passed on from one generation to another. None of them

was actually true, he'd told himself. But the story behind Cobaltus, and the appearance of the blue goblin girl, was starting to change his ideas. An empire that would rule over the world. That was part of the Anvil legend too, and the bit that scared him the most. Where will all this end up, he asked himself. The boy had no idea.

Brandon, therefore, decided to call it a night and return to his room, and thence go to bed. He headed back toward the school, moving away from the whispering Rift Wood trees. Once safely asleep though, the star Cobaltus continued to climb higher and higher, and glitter ever more brightly in the Mi-Rethyn night sky.

**- Chapter 15 -
Unusual Breakfasts**

The rich wooden floor glowed with a delicate shade of brown, as orange light poured in through thin curtains and bounced off the dark varnish, which had been so carefully polished up only the day before. Facing east, the room containing the goblin girl was bound to receive the full power of the Mi-Rethyn sun, once it managed to climb over the Rift Wood trees. When high in the sky, the sun's colour often disappeared due to its intense brightness, but on clear days early in the morning, or late in the evening, its orange tinge would fill the sky with brilliant fire, so it looked as if all the heavens were ablaze.

The goblin girl turned her head to look at the curtains. She'd woken shortly before, and in something of a daze, had found it pleasant to watch the window slowly get brighter and brighter. The room she was in now looked fabulous, fit for a princess she would say. A huge four-poster bed, chairs, a sofa, wardrobes, dressing tables covered in costly-looking jars of ointment, and various other objects, were all here in abundance. She wondered, for a short while, if she were in fact dead, and that all she could see was part of the goblin paradise of Yak-Tarsis. However, the splitting pain in her head soon told her that this was no heaven. She put a hand to her forehead and found it had been well bandaged. I wonder who did that?

Memory drifted back to her. The young girl who got in the way, the chase away from the school, the racing cart, the tunnel of green light, the trees. Who knows where she was now. The sound of a key turning the only lock of the only door in the

room suddenly caught the girl's attention, and a look of fear came over her face. Mrs Jantill marched in, followed by Salice.

"Oh, look! The poor girl has woken up at last. Well, bless my soul! And how are we looking today?" asked Mrs Jantill.

The goblin girl looked as if two phantom spectres were paying her a visit from the goblin hell of Krullen.

"Salice, draw the curtains, there's a dear, and get some air in. This room is stuffy enough to kill a cat," continued Mrs Jantill, walking to the bed.

Salice moved to the window, drew back the shades and opened the catch. Sunlight struck the goblin girl's face and she winced as if hit by something hard. However, the girl did not turn instantly to black stone, as Brandon had been suggesting might happen the previous evening.

"Don't you like the sun then? It'll do you no end of good, you mark my words. Now you just sit up and let me look at your head," carried on Mrs Jantill.

The goblin girl's eyes adjusted to the bright light as Mrs Jantill examined her bandage.

"Well the bleeding seems to have finally stopped, but you'll need a change of dressing I'll say," said Mrs Jantill, continuing to check the girl's head, "so while I go and get one, Salice has brought you some tasty morsels to eat, so you just tuck in."

As Mrs Jantill was about to walk out the door, she asked Salice if she'd be comfortable about remaining with the pale blue goblin girl.

"Yes, Mrs Jantill," answered Salice politely.

Taking one look at the goblin though, Salice thought she'd rather be locked in a cage with a bad-tempered sabre-toothed tiger, but at least the girl did seem to be somewhat calmer than

she had been yesterday. Mrs Jantill marched off down the corridor to her medical room, hidden away elsewhere in the school.

Salice put a breakfast tray on a chair close to the bed. It contained a pot of tea, a couple of cups, a bowl of some oaty-fruity mixture, along with a jug of creamy milk. There was also a hot plate of fried eggs, thick rashers of bacon, several sausages, a few baked potato slices, and to round it all off, some toast and butter. The aroma from this lot was wonderful, and in fact, most traveller's inns or guest houses couldn't have offered a better breakfast. The goblin girl had not eaten for a day and a half but still looked at the tray as if it were writhing with living snakes, or covered with mud-caked worms, or crawling with giant twelve-legged dongle-beetles. The same look of fear remained across her face. She was starving hungry and looked desperately at Salice. It was the first time Salice's eyes had locked with those of the girl. The goblin had cold-looking steel blue eyes, a bit like Rhea's, but these were larger and the pupils were oval, like those of a cat in bright daylight. The tension was becoming unbearable.

"It's all right, it's not poisoned!" exclaimed Salice loudly. "If we wanted you dead, then Brandon would have cut off your head during the middle of last night, while you were asleep, and stuck it on a pole outside the school gate for everyone to see!"

Salice was almost as surprised at what she'd said as the girl was. However, it was just what was needed to break the ice. The pale blue girl almost smiled and then reached out for the hot plate. Soon she was tucking into the food nicely. Salice had assumed that the girl would just eat with her claws, like some

complete animal, but she was taken aback at the way the goblin girl carefully cut up her food with the silver knife and fork provided. Come on Salice, sort yourself out, and treat her like a normal person for goodness sake, the kitchen girl thought.

"Would you like some tea?" Salice asked, as the goblin finished off the last of the potato slices.

The girl nodded without looking up. Salice poured out two cups, one for the girl, one for herself.

"Do you take milk and sugar?"

The girl again nodded without looking up. Salice added the ingredients to the tea and gave the girl her cup. She took it with the clawed hands she had.

"My name's Salice Baffer," said Salice, trying to sound as nice as possible. "Do you have a name?"

The goblin girl looked up this time, and reaching out to grab the bowl of oaty-fruity mixture, she said 'Illmith' in a strange off-key kind of voice.

"Pleased to meet you Illmith," said Salice, thinking that Illmith was a very nice, if somewhat strange name. "Do you want the milk?"

The girl nodded. She did a lot of nodding Salice thought.

"How's it going?" asked Rhea, who'd very quietly, and a little nervously, crept into the room without the others noticing.

Illmith looked across suddenly, an expression of fear returning to her face with real vengeance. The last time Illmith had seen this particular girl, they'd been facing each other, weapons grasped in hands, ready to do battle. Salice looked around, more than a little annoyed.

“What are you doing here?” she said sharply. “All you’re doing is scaring the patient!”

“Sorry. I was just visiting our new friend, who by the looks of things is feeling much better,” said Rhea very apologetically, “which is good I’m sure. I didn’t mean to scare anybody. I can go if you think it best.”

“No,” sighed Salice. “You might as well stay. Illmith, this is Rhea. Rhea, this is Illmith.”

Illmith didn’t look the least bit convinced that the newcomer was a friend.

“She’s perfectly safe,” assured Salice, “and a good friend of mine, but does have a habit of sneaking around and poking her nose into other people’s business far too often.”

Salice gave Rhea a knowing smile and Illmith, seeing the girls were obviously good friends, relaxed again.

“I managed to sneak these out of the kitchen,” said Rhea, first looking at Salice on the word ‘sneak’ and then offering a paper bag to Illmith.

Illmith took the bag, and peering inside, found the dried relen-grapes hiding within. As luck would have it, Illmith liked dried fruit very much, so the gift went down rather well.

“Do you feel better?” asked Rhea, keen to start a conversation.

Illmith put the bag down and then put a hand to her head.

“I still hurt,” she said in her off-key voice, while looking down mournfully.

There was a pause.

“I sorry about what happened,” Illmith then said sheepishly.

“Don’t worry about it, we can discuss all that later,” said Rhea. “We just want you to get well.”

Illmith lay back on the bed feeling tired, as Mrs Jantill returned with a bag of medical items.

“Don’t crowd the poor girl, you two,” said Mrs Jantill. “She’ll think she’s in a zoo if people keep staring at her all the time.”

The nurse started to get a fresh bandage out of her bag.

“Why don’t you two run along now. You can both come back later if the patient wishes,” she said, looking at Illmith.

Illmith nodded.

“We’ll be back, we promise,” said Rhea.

“You bet,” said Salice.

The two girls then left, their voices getting quieter and quieter as they talked together, and walked further and further down the corridor. Illmith looked at the door until they were out of earshot. She hoped they would come back soon, they seemed nice. However, the smile soon left her face. It didn’t really change anything. Dire trouble was on its way to this part of the world, and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, that anybody would ever be able to do about it.

“Come on then, sit up,” said Mrs Jantill. “If that wound has closed, and you don’t feel too dizzy, then we might let you go outside for some fresh air a bit later on. You would like that, wouldn’t you?”

Illmith nodded again. Dire trouble or not, at least she could enjoy being at this school for a while. That was something.

Menonn sat with a pale-looking Jade at the breakfast table that morning. She was not enjoying school, and in fact, wasn’t

her normal chirpy self at all, and Menonn was getting quite concerned about it. He would have given anything for her to make some silly remark about his cane or hairstyle or anything at all really. Seeing her sit all quiet and still, having not even touched her food, was just plain unnerving.

Jade had been in quite a state when he'd decided to go and visit the girl in her room, late the previous afternoon. By then, she'd spent enough time crying and feeling somewhat sorry for herself, and was glad for someone else to be with her. After a difficult start to their conversation, they played some games with Jade's excellent set of Sasko cards and soon both were feeling much better.

However, once the darkness of the evening drew in, and the candles had to be lit, Jade started feeling awful again. Menonn went and told Mrs Jantill about his young friend, who then came to see how she was. After waiting outside in the corridor for a while, Mrs Jantill told Menonn that the shock of recent events would possibly last for several days to come and that the best thing her friends could do was keep a good eye on her and let her know how much they all liked her. I'll make quite sure of that, Menonn told himself.

Mr Ashterrie then sat down next to the miserable-looking children.

"Are we in trouble?" asked Menonn respectfully.

"No young man, you are not. Quite the opposite in fact. You've been an example to us all," said Ashterrie.

"I haven't," said Jade sadly.

Mr Ashterrie looked at the pale young girl.

"You are only ten, young lady, and you should try and remember that from time to time," said Mr Ashterrie in a

gentle voice. "We don't really expect younger members of the school to become swash-buckling heroes or heroines in an instant when trouble or problems come their way. It all takes time, and some people take longer than others to find their feet in the world, and the ones who take longer often turn out to be the best people of all."

Jade just looked at the untouched food on her breakfast plate.

"I suppose I ought to pull myself together then and get back to work," she said feebly.

"Not at all," said Mr Ashterrie. "In fact, I was going to suggest that you two take the day off. Flance is leaving for Loxrift in a very little while, and if you jump on his re-built cart, you can ride down there, wander around the market for a bit, and maybe call in on Janine's youngsters. I've even arranged for Flance to wait for you at the bell tower, and bring you back late in the afternoon."

Janine was Salice's older sister. She was married with two young children, a boy, Lucan, and a girl, Cynth. Jade liked them a lot. She smiled at the thought of an easy happy day away from the trouble and trauma that seemed to be all around the school at the moment.

"Thank you, sir," said Jade quietly.

"Thank you sir!" said Menonn enthusiastically, relieved that the school was taking Jade's situation seriously.

"The least I could do," said Mr Ashterrie, getting up and walking slowly away.

He was off to a staff meeting, to discuss school security, and how they could do a bit better at keeping uninvited people, and uninvited goblins, outside where they belonged.

Jade, feeling better already, managed to at least polish off the large fried mushrooms on her plate. She and Menonn then left the hall, got a few things from their rooms, and were soon enjoying the morning sun as Flance's cart rumbled, at its normal gentle speed, through the beautiful Rift Wood trees, toward Loxrift.

- Chapter 16 -
Becoming the Best of Friends

Later that morning, Illmith Raxxlennin was taken out to the Chief Master's personal garden by Mrs Jantill, who more or less ordered her to enjoy the fresh air and sunshine. The garden's serene atmosphere soon worked its charm on Illmith, and before long she was sitting peacefully on the grass, her mind more at ease than it had been in a long, long time. Her eyes and ears focused on the hum and colour of red and yellow bees, hopping from flower to flower, all busy about their work.

"You must be Illmith," said a calm pleasant voice from behind her.

Illmith turned around suddenly, her eyes trying to make out the newcomer, in what was for her, very bright light. She didn't recognise this girl, but something about the newcomer made Illmith a little less afraid than she often was.

"Hi. My name's Clarne," said the stranger.

The newcomer was dressed in a rich deep brown top, with a matching skirt, had excellent tan-coloured shoes, and in her hand was a shoulder bag that probably cost more than a horse. Illmith watched closely as Clarne sat down.

"I see they've forced you to sit out in the sun as well," said Clarne. "They're always telling me to come out here."

Illmith looked puzzled.

"Why that?" she asked.

Clarne agreed at once with Rhea's assessment of the blue girl's voice. It really was strange.

"I suffer from an illness, but no one knows what it is," admitted Clarne. "I just get so tired that I can't do anything. It's really annoying at times."

"You not look unwell," said Illmith slowly. "I look unwell," she continued, putting a hand to her head.

Clarne smiled slightly. People were always telling her how well she looked, but often Clarne felt just awful. It was another aspect of her strange illness that made it so difficult to cope with.

"I nearly died just over a year ago," responded Clarne, "and I'm told that I may never get well."

"I sorry," said Illmith, who suddenly realised that maybe she wasn't the only one in the whole wide world with terrible problems.

"Never mind," said Clarne, smiling. "How are you?"

Illmith decided to be more honest.

"Confused," she answered.

"What about?" asked Clarne, genuinely interested.

"Everything," answered Illmith.

"I'd guess you have quite a story to tell," suggested Clarne.

Illmith nodded. The pale blue girl now sensed that Clarne wanted to know all about her.

"Where are you from?" asked Clarne, dying to know.

Illmith looked down at the grass. She wondered if she could trust this richly dressed and rather healthy-looking girl, who claimed to be really ill. Why not? No one at the school had been anything other than very kind to her so far.

"I travel from land of Megron," said Illmith, almost embarrassed.

A cold sensation came over Clarne. The word 'Megron' was associated with evil and always had been.

"But no one lives there," said Clarne. "It's a wasteland."

"We live underneath it," said Illmith. "What's left of us that is."

Clarne then listened in absolute fascination as Illmith explained how long ago, before the time of the Dark Mist, the goblin race had lived in huge caverns below what was now called Megron or Ibtannia.

"There were caves high as sky," she stated, "and whole towns built within them!"

Illmith went on to explain that when the Mace of Hell, or the Hammer of Krullen as the goblins called it, came and smashed into the world of Mi-Rethyn, most of the giant caverns then collapsed. As a result, said Illmith sadly, nearly all of the goblin people were killed outright in a single day. The ways to the surface were blocked in, and the goblin folk left alive were forced to live in darkness, till they could find other routes out.

Then during the time of the Dark Mist, life was utterly miserable, but at least most people on the surface soon forgot about the very existence of goblins and left them alone ever after. The great goblin wars that had raged on for hundreds of years became a dim memory until they too were forgotten altogether. So goblins moved into the realm of myth and legend, and people forgot they were a fine, good-looking race, and began to think of them as being ugly, evil, nasty and spiteful. The sort of thing to scare young children with, late at night. Be good or the goblins will get you!

Clarne was just dazzled by all this. She had no idea that whole races of people could fall out of sight in the way the

goblins had. She also felt sorry for this blue girl now. Life must have been very hard for her.

"Why did you come here then?" asked Clarne suddenly.

Illmith had been hoping no one would ask that question. She now trusted Clarne but wasn't going to tell her what she was really up to. Not that Illmith was really certain herself, but some things would remain a secret for a while longer she decided.

"I on adventure," answered Illmith, a bit sheepishly. "I saw three of you at sad castle, many days ago, and follow them back to this place."

Clarne, who was no idiot, sensed that Illmith didn't want to let on much more, so she decided not to push the matter any further. Salice appeared.

"Coffee and cakes for the patients!" she said cheerfully.

"Oh thanks," said Clarne.

"They look nice," said Illmith.

"Hope you enjoy," said Salice, leaving.

The two girls enjoyed their snacks, and both went quiet in the peaceful atmosphere of the garden. But today, even in this delightful place, Clarne's mind began to be troubled. Her eyes watched Illmith looking at the bees. Rhea had mentioned something about a vast mythical goblin empire only a couple of days before. Clarne hadn't taken too much notice at the time, but maybe that would all have to change, in the not-too-distant future. The sick girl then glanced slowly around the beautiful, peaceful garden. It certainly seemed a long way from any empires and the chaotic wars that always went with them. Hopefully, thought Clarne, that's the way it would stay.

Flance's cart rumbled back through the school gate, late that afternoon, with both Jade and Menonn sitting happily on the back. The two friends had simply had the most wonderful day. In the marketplace at Loxrift, they first haggled with a local fruit merchant over the price of some fresh rellen-grapes. Then Menonn managed to get some sugar cakes at a knockdown price, while Jade tried her best on the flower stall. She eventually bought some particularly bright orange din-a-noffs for Janine, which looked just fabulous, but Menonn reckoned he could have got the flowers at half the asking price. Jade, however, wasn't bothered.

"It's the thought that counts," she had said, "not the cost!"

Next, the two children purchased some stuffed woollen toys for Janine's children. Lucan liked the centaur that Menonn gave him, while Cynth didn't quite know what to make of what Jade had bought her.

"I think it's a bird of some sort," said Jade to Janine.

"Whatever it is, it's certainly bright and colourful," Janine had said, "and these flowers will look simply gorgeous in a vase."

Jade then made a point of re-telling Menonn that giving presents to other people was all about being nice and that getting a good deal wasn't really the main idea. After spending the afternoon playing with Janine's young children, Jade and Menonn had tea and later met Flance at the Loxrift bell tower for the trip home. Travelling along the Rift Wood road was simply glorious, as the late afternoon orange sun flickered through the trees like a huge crackling fire. It was certainly enough to help Jade forget about the goblin girl and all that horrible business.

The next day, however, Jade didn't have a hope of forgetting about the goblin girl. All her friends were talking about nothing else. It was Illmith this, and Illmith said that, and Illmith thinks such and such, and isn't Illmith just wonderful, and so on. Everybody was at it. Even Menonn was getting to know her, but Jade hadn't even thought about setting eyes on the strange girl yet.

"She's not a monster," said Clarne at breakfast.

"You should go and say hello. I'm sure you'll get along just fine," said Rhea, during the mid-morning break.

"For a goblin, she's really not bad," said Brandon at lunch, which coming from Brandon was high praise indeed.

"You'll have to meet her sometime," said Menonn, just before afternoon tea.

Not if I have anything to do with it, thought Jade. She didn't like the way everybody suddenly seemed to be Illmith's best friend. Whatever happened to me she wondered. Feeling dejected, Jade wandered out of the school buildings after tea and went to the stable area. Her horse Nester was there.

"At least you're still my friend," she said to Nester, while giving him some hay to eat.

Nester happily munched away on his food. He would be friends with anybody who gave him something to chew on. Jade then noticed the small brown horse in the next stall. It wasn't one she recognised. Looking around, she saw Brickly coming across the yard, carrying two metal buckets full of oats.

"Whose horse is that?" said Jade, pointing.

"That be that goblin girl's 'orse, Miss Vixoe," said Brickly. "I hear he can run like the wind and fly like a bird!"

“Oh. Thanks, Brickly,” acknowledged Jade.

“Pleasure Miss,” said Brickly, tipping both buckets of oats into a trough.

Jade glanced back at the small brown horse. She wasn't convinced by the 'fly like a bird' bit, but Jade knew a little about horses and reasoned that this one looked like a good runner. I wonder if the goblin girl would let me have a ride?

A moment later, Jade was staring at the floor. She realised then that she'd been acting a bit silly all day. You're letting the side down again, she told herself. Jade reasoned that if her friends said Illmith was nice, then she probably was. After all, her friends were as good as anybody could hope to have, and none of them was a liar. Come on Jade, sort yourself out! She then wondered where Illmith might be. With everybody else most likely. Jade patted Nester on the nose and said something about how easy it must be to be a horse, and not have to worry about all the things she had to worry about. Then she set off back toward the school buildings, determined to make a new friend.

Illmith had wanted to meet Jade for some time. The others said she was really nice, but Illmith guessed that Jade was avoiding her. I scare the little girl, she thought sadly. It was late afternoon by now and she was getting a bit tired. It had been only two days since Illmith's riding accident, and her head still hurt badly from time to time. The others were a really nice bunch, but they kept asking questions about all kinds of strange things, and in many ways, she was beginning to feel rather lonely. The only one of your kind for a thousand stratums in all

directions, that's what you are, she told herself. There was a gentle knock at the door. Here we go again, thought Illmith.

“Enter in,” she said.

Jade had forgotten that Illmith's voice had this strange off-key nature. At the sound of it, she nearly decided to give up on the whole idea of meeting her, and sneak shyly back to her room instead, to carry on reading her latest storybook. In it, some dragons had just burned down a dozen castles, looking for Prince Histlain, who was busy trying to save his kingdom from the wicked Vil-Moreson, High Master of the Black Warlocks. It would be great to find out what happened next!

Oh no you don't, Miss Jade Vixoe, she thought to herself. You've spent enough of your life running away from things, so for once, you're going to be brave. The door opened and Illmith watched as a shy young girl peered round at her, not sure whether to come in or run away. Illmith realised who it was at once. She tried to give Jade her best friendly smile and beckoned her to come in. Jade sensed she was welcome, and so stepped gingerly into the east wing room, letting the door close behind her.

“Have seat,” Illmith said.

Jade had only seen Illmith in a state of panic for a few blurred moments before now and hadn't taken that much in. But now, the pale blue-skinned, deep blue-eyed, and long blond-haired girl looked more like Jade's ideal image of an elf, rather than a goblin monster. Not that Jade ever thought elves might be blue, but Illmith's features certainly seemed elven to her.

“I so sorry, so sorry about other day,” said Illmith, very downcast. “I never mean to hurt you. I sorry I shout at you. I make big mess of things.”

Jade didn't want the girl to feel miserable, so she thought she better say something nice.

“Well you didn't mean it, so why don't we forget about it,” suggested Jade, who couldn't believe she was talking to someone who'd been swinging a sword at her only a few days previously.

“It not easy to forget,” said Illmith, looking down.

Jade suddenly felt sorry for this strange person. Illmith appeared tired and alone.

“I noticed your horse outside. He looks like a fast mount,” said Jade, trying to get the conversation going.

Illmith glanced up.

“He very good. I love my horse. Do you have horse?” she asked.

“Yes. Mine's called Nester. My family gave him to me when I came to the school, for the first time, nearly a year ago.”

“Mine called Gatchwin. We travel very long way, on ship, to be in this part of world.”

“Gatchwin? Does that mean anything, or is it just a nice name?” asked Jade.

“It just nice name,” said Illmith, smiling.

“Well, he looks happy enough in the stable. I'm sure the men are looking after him.”

“But he need ride. Perhaps you take him out sometime,” suggested Illmith shyly. “I not able ride for ages,” she continued, placing her hand on her forehead.

Jade could hardly believe this.

“Of course! I'd love to take him out!” she said at once.

So with the ice broken, the two girls continued to talk, and swap stories about each other, until early evening when Mrs Jantill came in.

“Good to see you here, young Miss Vixoe,” said Mrs Jantill, “but I'm afraid that Illmith really must rest. You'll have to come back tomorrow.”

Jade was certainly going to come back tomorrow. She wished Illmith a good night and left, ever so glad she'd plucked up the courage to come in the first place. Illmith had particularly liked Jade. She was a shy happy girl, who seemed to be in some ways a bit more normal than some of the others. She hoped Jade had liked her. At least Gatchwin will be all right now, thought Illmith. Jade would look after him, of that Illmith was sure.

- Chapter 17 -
Lost Tempers and Dark Foreboding

Several days drifted past. The weather became cooler and more cloudy. Blue skies turned to grey, and the orange sun disappeared completely. Winds from the northwest came and with them cold rain. Soon it was beating down on the academy almost non-stop. This sort of thing occasionally happened during the spring but nobody looked forward to it. Some of the locals claimed, that during such weather, the Rift Wood trees huddled together more than they usually did, in a vain effort to protect themselves. It was just an old wives tale, but the RiftWood School domestic staff were most certainly huddling together. Demos, Flance, Brickly and Salice were all sitting in the kitchen area, looking more than a bit gloomy. Kallijine was elsewhere in the school polishing woodwork, but she was as miserable as everybody else.

“Rain like this gets into your bones,” said Flance drearily, “and the horses don’t like it either.”

They all nodded slowly. It was the first time in three days that Flance had risked coming to the school. He was so wet on arrival that the others insisted he changed his clothes before he caught his death of cold. Salice had knocked up some really nice coffee but nobody seemed to be that interested in drinking it. The rain continued to pour down like liquid ash, grey and dull, and everybody was fed up. It was not the happiest day in the history of the RiftWood Academy of Historical Science.

Jade wandered past and came in smiling to say hello. Not even the worst of weather could dampen her cheerful spirit. The others all looked at her with miserable faces.

“There’s fresh coffee in the pot if you want some,” said Salice. “Nobody else is drinking it.”

“Thanks,” responded Jade.

“Can that goblin friend of yours make the rain stop?” asked Demos.

Jade wasn’t sure if Demos was joking or not, and didn’t fancy getting on the wrong side of anybody today.

“I don’t think she knows any magic,” said Jade carefully.

“Shame,” said Demos. “I’d give my lunch to anybody who did.”

Brickly and Flance smiled for the first time since the incident just after breakfast. Demos had knocked his leg on one of the heavy tables used for food preparation and then sworn at it several times over. For his trouble, he was promptly told by Mrs Habbit that language of that sort belonged outside in the rain, and that’s where he would be if he didn’t sort himself out. Both Brickly and Flance had smirks on their faces for a while after that, but the cold drumming rain eventually wiped all such smiles from everyone’s expressions.

“You better go, Jade,” suggested Salice. “Everybody here is in a sour mood.”

Jade decided that was a good idea, and wandered out carrying a red mug of Salice’s hot coffee. She walked carefully through the school, not wanting to spill her drink, to the games room. But nobody was playing julnave today. Rather, all the friends, Rhea, Brandon, Clarne, Menonn, Jade, and Illmith, along with Naylen, were having a big ‘Adventurers and Treasure Hunters’ discussion meeting. It may be raining now, but the rain would stop, and they had important things to talk about, and important plans to make for when it finally did stop.

“Alright,” said Naylen, who’d been waiting for Jade to return. “Where do we start?”

“Let’s start with what we’ve got,” suggested Brandon, smiling.

The rain, apparently, made no difference to Brandon’s silly comments either, though some people wished it would.

“Good idea,” said Naylen.

He then pointed at the two julnave tables they had pulled together, over toward the chairs. On one, the one furthest away were the dark red candlestick and the midnight-blue tiara. The second table was covered with Brandon’s rusty shield and a piece of card with Jade’s ‘secret runes’, as they were being called, inscribed upon it. There were also some other bits of card. These had various keywords written on them, like Cloranus, Juelus, Goblin Ring, Blue Star, Anvil and so on. Rhea then hunted through a box of julnave playing pieces and put the blue princess figure on the table as well.

“I still think it’s important,” Rhea said emphatically, “but I’m definitely sure that it doesn’t refer to Illmith.”

“I no princess,” said Illmith quietly.

“We’ve all noticed that,” responded Brandon.

Illmith glared at him. When she stared at you in a bad mood, Illmith’s cat-like blue eyes cut through your soul, like a hot dagger going through soft butter. Brandon wished he’d kept quiet. Naylen thought he’d better try and organise things for a second time.

“Right,” said Naylen. “Let’s start with the candlestick. What do we know?”

The arguments started at once.

“It’s evil!” said Rhea and Menonn together.

“No!” said Illmith, her potent gaze going straight to Menonn. “Goblins make candlestick. It not evil.”

“It’s originally from Megron, so it must be evil,” said Menonn, who didn’t like Illmith’s stare any more than Brandon, but wasn’t going to be put off by it.

“No! It stolen from goblin people by Megron people,” said Illmith angrily. “Megron people make slaves of goblin people, and force them to work mines.”

“We don’t know that,” said Menonn.

“I do!” shouted Illmith, standing up almost in a rage. “It not fair! Life never fair! You lot no understand!”

Everybody was somewhat taken aback by Illmith’s harsh outburst. She obviously felt very strongly about all this. Naylen, however, didn’t care who felt strongly about what. He had no intention of spending the morning refereeing a verbal battle.

“Now just calm down, everyone,” he said. “We’re all friends here, let’s try to keep it that way.”

Illmith sat down. The others all stared at her.

“I sorry,” she said quietly.

This was going to be harder than Naylen first thought. Perhaps a few helpful comments would be a good idea. A sudden gust of wind threw sheets of rain against the windows and shutters of the games room. Naylen glanced outside. It looked horrible out there.

“Now then,” said Naylen, “before we go any further, let’s just understand what we’re doing here. We’re talking about things from the time of the Dark Mist. Many terrible happenings occurred back then, and in all that great evil, absolutely everybody ended up suffering a great deal, both goblins and men alike.”

Naylen paused, hoping the message would sink in. He continued.

“Now Illmith’s people in particular came off very badly, as she’s told us repeatedly over the last few days, so let’s all be careful in what we say.”

Clarne, who’d been very quiet up till then, had an idea.

“Why don’t we continue by letting Illmith say what she thinks this mystery is all about, and then we can make comments afterwards,” she suggested.

“Now that’s wise thinking,” said Naylen, glad that someone other than himself was trying to be useful.

Illmith stood up and moved over to the table with Brandon’s shield upon it. She felt a bit stupid after her recent outburst and looked at the others shyly.

“Go on,” said Jade encouragingly, still holding her red coffee cup.

Illmith gathered her thoughts.

“Long, long ago, goblin people learn to make six metals of colour. All better than gold. They red and dark blue and black and yellow and orange and...”

Illmith paused looking confused.

“Last one most valuable,” she said thinking. “Lilac! Last one lilac. Then people of Megron start digging huge mine, and find goblin people underground and make them all slaves. Candlestick and tiara most likely made by goblins in Megron furnace, and stolen by ShipYard Tridom spies. So candlestick from Megron, but not evil,” finished off Illmith, looking at both Rhea and Menonn.

“How do we know that goblins made them, and not wielders of magic from Megron’s Academy of Dark Power?” asked Menonn politely.

Illmith kept calm this time.

“Megron people try steal goblin secrets and goblin metals. Megron people try to make colour metals themselves but cannot. Only goblins have right skill.”

“So you’re saying,” said Rhea, pointing at the objects on the table, “that these heavy metal artefacts were produced in Megron, but have no dark magical power since goblins actually had to make them.”

Illmith nodded. All eyes locked on the dark red candlestick now. Not only had this thing most likely stood on the dazzling triangular throne table, that the ShipYard Tridom rulers used to govern their empire. Not only had it come from the very depths of Megron itself. But now, even more amazingly, they knew it was forged by goblins and was therefore not magical or evil. That was one small bit of one mystery cleared up.

“Why couldn’t the magic users of Megron work out how to make things like this?” asked Clarne. “They must have been very clever to achieve all the other things they did.”

“Only goblins understand nature of metal. Men not able to. Just as animals not understand how make things,” said Illmith proudly.

“Isn’t there something about goblins being taught the secrets of metal in that old legend of the Anvil?” asked Jade.

“Goblins not believe Anvil legend,” said Illmith coldly.

Jade felt hurt. She never liked it when someone gave a hard reply to something she said, even if it was a friend. She tried again.

“What about the tiara? Do we know anything about that?” she asked.

The friends all looked around at each other shaking their heads. Most of the attention had been focused on the candlestick ever since it was found. No one knew a thing about the tiara.

“I see,” said Naylen. “I suggest that someone hunts through some old books, looking for any legendary tiaras that may have existed.”

“Forget any old books! What were the candlestick and that tiara doing down a dry well, in a sad castle, only four day’s ride from our school?” asked Brandon.

Illmith shook her head. She had no idea.

“What about the strange writing on them?” asked Jade.

Illmith spoke up.

“It very old goblin script. I no understand it.”

“We don’t seem to be coming up with many answers,” commented Rhea gloomily.

The rain lashed violently at the shutters again. It was now getting very dark outside.

“What about Jade’s runes from the sad castle?” asked Menonn to Illmith. “Have you worked those out yet?”

“Ah! Those up-to-date goblin battle language. They a warning riddle. I think they say something like ‘Beware Vaxen Labyrinth, Beware IllumiJex Blackness, past lie Secrets beyond all Darkness, Power beyond all Magic’. Long time since I try read battle script.”

“So what in the world is that supposed to mean?” asked Clarne, looking very confused.

“Oh, I think it’s secret code for ‘Illmith the Dark One is lost in a Maze’,” said Brandon smiling.

Illmith was not amused.

“My name mean ‘Light of Sky’ in goblin language,” she said, looking hard at Brandon.

“Well, there’s not much light coming from the sky at the moment,” said Brandon, glancing outside.

The rain continued to lash in sheets at the windows and shutters. It was supposed to be midday, but you almost needed candles to see within the games room, so dark was the sky.

“Very interesting. So I assume that’s about as far as we’re going to get on the runes and codes and objects for the time being,” said Naylen. “What about these star legends then?”

“New legend of Cloranus and Juelus just nice story for telling children. There no real goblin ring,” said Illmith, a bit more cheerfully.

“I never believed there was,” said Brandon. “But what about the old legend, you know, the one about the Anvil and the Empire and the blue star Cobaltus.”

Illmith looked down at the floor. Her face went hard, her clawed hands clenched into fists.

“All goblin people hate blue star,” she said in a strong smouldering version of her off-key voice. “I hate blue star. It pure cold evil.”

“Why hate a star?” asked Jade, both puzzled and concerned at the change in her new friend.

Illmith spoke slowly, her voice full of tension.

“Goblin people wait hundreds of years for lone-god’s empire of legend, but only Megron and Hammer of Krullen and

Aeon of Dark Mist come, and nearly kill all. Blue star not friend of goblin people. We blame it for all trouble.”

“But like Jade said earlier, the legend of the Anvil explains why the goblin people are so good at working with metals,” countered Menonn. “You can’t deny that.”

Illmith’s stare became as cold as ice, her expression as hard as stone.

“Legend also say goblin people weaker than men and legend promise fair empire. But it not right that goblin people weaker and empire never come. It just not fair. Star of cold blue a trick of horrible treachery. It...”

Illmith suddenly burst into tears and sank to the floor, sobbing deeply. Jade ran over and sat down next to her. A sudden blast of wind threw open some shutters at the far end of the room.

“We should stop!” said Rhea firmly. “This is just getting creepy. The more we talk about these dark things, the worse the weather keeps on getting.”

“I agree,” said Clarne. “It’s almost night outside!”

“It’s just heavy cloud,” said Brandon. “It was exactly the same last year.”

“I don’t care,” said Rhea. “I’ve had enough.”

“It’s nearly lunchtime anyway,” said Naylen. “Let’s take a break.”

The rain continued to fall in grey sheets all around the school. Naylen, Brandon and Menonn sat on their own at the back of the dining hall, their plates of food slowly going cold since none of them was particularly hungry. Illmith and Jade had gone back to Illmith’s room. Clarne and Rhea were

munching sandwiches in the school kitchen with Salice. Candles had been lit at the dining hall tables in an effort to make the atmosphere a little better.

“I’m starting to understand why Illmith gets on edge so easily,” remarked Menonn. “If all our people had to go through that sort of thing, then I’m sure I’d be a bit cranky as well.”

Brandon agreed. He really liked Illmith deep down and felt more than a little sorry for the goblin girl. The blue star was obviously a sore point for her. He wouldn’t mention it again when she was around.

“What shall we do next?” asked Naylen.

“What do you mean?” asked Brandon.

“Well, you want to uncover more of this mystery don’t you?” asked Naylen slyly.

The two boys nodded. This was the biggest mystery either of them had ever come across by a long, long way. Menonn thought for a moment.

“We need to find out what that writing on the metal candlestick and tiara says,” he suggested.

“That would be a step forward,” said Naylen. “Whatever it is, it must be very important.”

“But where could we find something to help us read ancient goblin script?” asked Brandon. “If Illmith doesn’t understand it, then how can we?”

“Maybe she just needs a few extra clues to help her get started,” suggested Menonn.

“Or she’s not telling us something,” stated Brandon.

“Are you sure? She doesn’t seem like a liar to me,” said Naylen carefully.

Brandon thought for a moment. There were plenty of liars around, but he didn't really think Illmith was one of them.

"Maybe not," he said, "but that still leaves us with the problem of not being able to crack those candlestick runes."

Naylen suddenly seemed to be lost in thought for a moment.

"What about Jade's runes? You know, all that stuff about IllumiJex Blackness and Vaxen Labyrinths and darkness and magic and power," said Brandon, after a bit of a pause. "I mean what kind of cryptic nonsense is all of that?"

"It was the Vaxen family that built the sad old castle," said Menonn, "and the word 'Vaxen' is mentioned in the rune riddle, so there's a connection."

"And according to Rhea, the Vaxens are still living in WixWyn," commented Brandon. "They have a big house that you can sometimes visit, not far from the White Towers, and a huge landscaped garden."

Naylen spoke up.

"I've not been in these parts for a while, but isn't there a huge maze, like a labyrinth in that garden," he said.

"Oh yes!" said Menonn.

"And," said Brandon excitedly, "there's a big fairground ride called the WixWyn Wooden Labyrinth somewhere near there as well!"

"Now that I have heard of," remarked Naylen.

"Isn't it the biggest rail cart ride in all the world or something?" enquired Menonn.

"So we are asked to believe by those that built it," said Naylen.

"That would be fun to go on I bet," said Brandon.

A brilliant idea came into Naylen's mind.

"Look guys," he said, leaning over the table.

The boys listened in closely.

"From what we've said just now, the clues are starting to point toward WixWyn. Both the Vaxen house and these two labyrinths are over there."

"So?" enquired Menonn and Brandon together.

"So," said Naylen almost in a whisper, "to follow the clues, we have to go to WixWyn ourselves, check out these labyrinths, and have a jolly good sneak around that huge Vaxen house, to see what might be hiding in there!"

Menonn and Brandon could barely contain their excitement. A big treasure hunters trip out to the fabulous city of WixWyn! What a prospect!

"I bet they've got a library hidden in that house, full of goblin books!" said Menonn. "And we'll crack those candlestick symbols in no time."

"And I reckon at the centre of that maze, there's a secret trap door or something, that leads straight into an underground cavern full of goblin treasure!" joined in Brandon.

"What about the girls?" asked Menonn to Naylen.

"They can come too. WixWyn is a big place. We could easily split into several teams, to check out different things at the same time," said Naylen.

"Great! When can we go?" asked Brandon.

"As soon as the weather clears up, and as soon as I can get Mr Ashterrie to agree to all this, which I'm sure he will," answered Naylen.

"Fantastic!" said Brandon.

"Let's tell the others, that'll cheer them up!" said Menonn.

The two boys left and headed for the kitchen while Naylen continued to sit at the table thinking. It was now he who was holding something back, not Illmith. In his time, he'd come across many old legends, seen many ancient relics, and been on many great journeys, all around the world of Mi-Rethyn, but something about this 'Candlestick Mystery' as the children were starting to call it, seemed very different.

However, the thing that was filling Naylen's mind, at that very moment, was the mention of the strange word 'IllumiJex' by Illmith earlier. It suddenly made this adventure even more serious, and a lot more dangerous, than it already was. Naylen had heard whispers here and there, in various faraway places, of some dark shadowy organisation, with a very strange name, that no one knew much about. Except that it was supposed to be very, very secret and very, very powerful. Naylen hadn't paid that much attention to these rumours, thinking they were probably just old fireside stories. But maybe now was the time to change all that.

Naylen also remembered that Illmith had said something, a few days ago, about there being trouble on the way, but she couldn't explain what it was. Naylen hadn't taken much notice of that either but was now starting to think that she may well be right. In front of him, the candle on the dinner table flickered upon its simple metal stand. There were answers at WixWyn. There was also going to be trouble. Real trouble. Naylen would make extra sure he packed his silver-white goblin-forged metal sword with his things on this trip.

- Chapter 18 -
The Day of the Empire

Rhea glanced around. Looking up, she recognised the orange sky glowing far above her at once. Oh no, she thought, not this again! She was back in the red landscape world of Hennabree. Rhea shook her head. Although the last dream was nothing more than a hazy impression when she was awake, here it was as clear as crystal. Doubtless, I'll be asked more crazy riddles by that strange old man. At least the wind isn't blowing this time round, that's something to be grateful for.

"You remember me then?" said a voice out of nowhere.

Rhea thought for a moment. She could see no one, but the voice was certainly familiar.

"I know who you are. You're that old man, or god, or whatever I dreamed about some time ago," said Rhea. "But where are you?"

"Here," said the old man standing right next to her. "I'm never far away. You should know that by now."

Rhea felt disconcerted. This was only the second time she'd met this strange being, but many questions filled her head. Who was he? What was he really up to? Could he, or it, be trusted or not?

"Why have you come back?" she asked, realising it to be another of her own many questions.

"To be with you again," he said quite simply.

"But aren't you supposed to be busy building your empire?" asked Rhea, surprised that she could remember everything down to the last detail from her first dream.

"I am," remarked the old man, now moving over to the same table that had been there previously.

"How far have you got then?" she quizzed, hoping to find out something important.

"Further than you think," he said. "I've been at it for quite some time."

"Well, I haven't seen anything that looks like an empire in my world. It's all just the same as ever," said Rhea, surprised at how brave she was now feeling.

In fact, she didn't feel the least bit afraid.

"The empire already exists firmly in the future of your world," said the old man.

"In the future?" said Rhea, puzzled.

The old man nodded and sat down at the table, but there were no ginger and fruit buns this time, and no tea. Rhea distinctly remembered the old man saying there might be more ginger buns the next time they met. Maybe this was just a load of nonsense after all. Like most dreams.

"Oh, I see. Your empire is set far in the future, so we won't be seeing anything for ages and ages," commented Rhea.

A deeply unsettling thought then moved into Rhea's mind, which caused her attitude toward the old man to change suddenly. She stepped back from the table and looked around, not that anyone else was about of course. Then she locked her gaze back on the old man.

"You're the same lone-god who spoke to the goblin boy, Yilven Fraxleve, aren't you?" stated Rhea in a cold tone of voice.

"Very good! I see you've been doing your homework," said the old man.

“And you promised the goblin people an empire.”

“I did indeed,” stated the old man.

“And after two and a half thousand years, it has still never come!” said Rhea in an angry tone.

The image of Illmith bursting into tears several days ago, out of sheer frustration that the legends her people believed in never came true, still haunted Rhea. She felt so sorry for the goblin girl. And now it was becoming clear that it was all this lone-god’s fault. Maybe this was just a dream, but she was getting very cross!

“And now,” said Rhea, “you’re doing the same to us! Talking about some empire of the future, but knowing all along that it will never come. I see your game. Well, you won’t fool me, and you won’t fool my friends either!”

“I’m not trying to fool anybody,” replied the old man.

“Well, Illmith says you’re a betrayer. You first led the goblin people up the garden path, and then left them to their fate, and what’s worse, you didn’t lift a finger to help them. That makes you the worst kind of betrayer, a real traitor!” said Rhea, almost in a temper.

The old man stood up and picked up his stick. With some shock, Rhea suddenly realised her life could be over very shortly. Gods, even nasty ones who played tricks on people, were still very powerful. Perhaps the old man would frazzle her to a cinder, or turn her into a red beetle. Rhea backed off from the table even further. I hope I can wake up soon, she thought, this dream is fast becoming a nightmare.

“I gave the goblin people many secrets concerning the use of metal. They were very grateful for them, and have used those

secrets well, even if it was to make masses of weapons,” said the old man.

“Yes, but according to the legend, you made them weaker than men in the first place, so you had to do something to sort out the mess you made,” said Rhea, still afraid but still very angry.

“The mess I made?” said the old man slowly, in a very measured tone. “I remind you, young lady, that it was your people who oppressed the goblins, your people who made them into slaves, and your people who turned their lives into a misery, all because they were not as strong as you. That makes your people no better than a load of crude bullies!”

Rhea was stunned. The old man had never spoken to her like this before. She much preferred it when he was nice.

“It was the people of Megron who did most of those things,” said Rhea quietly.

The old man sat back down, leaning his stick against the table.

“But you are of the same race. I’m afraid that makes you just as bad,” he said.

Rhea thought carefully. Was the old man right? Did he have a point? Not really.

“Even if you’re correct, it still doesn’t make any difference. Your empire continues to never come,” she stated flatly. “So that makes you a liar!”

“It will come. It has started already.”

Although the old man never raised his voice, Rhea sensed that his words carried more force and truth than she could ever understand. They sliced through her mind like freshly sharpened knives. Whatever else he was, the old man was not a

liar she then realised. For better or for worse, his empire would come.

“Will we get to see any of it?” she asked genuinely.

“Yes.”

“When? In fifty years?” asked Rhea, returning quickly to her sarcastic tone.

“Not quite. I was thinking of tomorrow actually,” said the old man matter-of-factly.

“Tomorrow!” exclaimed Rhea. “What’s going to happen tomorrow? Have you got an army, ready to march out in force and conquer your empire for you?”

The old man smiled. He didn’t need an army. At least not yet.

“Many things will happen tomorrow. It’s going to be quite a day,” he answered.

Rhea kept trying to calm down, but every time she did so, she remembered why she’d gotten so angry in the first place.

“What about Illmith?” she asked in a sharp tone.

“What about her?”

“She doesn’t believe in your empire. I’m not sure I do either. But she can’t believe it. Too many things have happened. She gets upset very easily about it all. And what’s more, all the goblins hate your blue star. They called it a star of betrayal, and I can’t say I blame them!”

“They call it the Star of Cold Blue,” said the old man, “but your friend Illmith will find much tomorrow.”

“I don’t think she’s looking for anything.”

“She will still find it.”

The conversation seemed to stop. There was a long pause. Tea and cream cakes appeared on the table. Still no ginger buns

though, Rhea noticed. A clump of orange clouds passed overhead, drifting lazily across the strange sky. The old man helped himself to the refreshments.

“Tomorrow you say?” questioned Rhea.

“I promise. It’ll be a day you never forget.”

“Very well. But we shall see,” said Rhea, who still wasn’t going to take anything at face value.

“Oh, and there’s a couple of other things,” said the old man, looking up.

“What are they?” asked Rhea, wondering what was coming next in this eerie dream.

“First, those are for you,” said the old man, pointing at her side.

Rhea looked down. A paper bag had appeared in her left hand. She opened it slowly. The delicious smell of freshly baked ginger buns rose up to greet her. Rhea wondered if she ought to say thank you, but she was still mad about this empire business, and how it had upset Illmith. So she didn’t.

“You said there was another thing?”

“Yes. I would never frazzle you to a cinder, nor turn you into a red beetle. Other gods may do that. Not me.”

And for the first time in this dream, Rhea actually smiled. The red scene then vanished in a flash.

Everybody was up early the next day. They all felt fresh and full of beans. Even Clarne seemed to have more energy than usual. They’d arrived at the outskirts of WixWyn fairly late the previous afternoon. Mr Ashterrie had an old friend who ran a school named Dale Field, in the eastern part of the city. It was not quite in the same class as RiftWood, but then few schools

were, but still, Dale Field made an ideal place for the children to stay at, while they were exploring WixWyn.

“Look at that sky!” said Brandon, leaning out of a window in the Dale Field school dining hall. “Did you ever see such a shade of pure blue!”

There wasn’t a single cloud or even a hazy wisp anywhere, even along the horizon. Rarely was the sky this clear, even in high summer, let alone during late spring.

“That means it’s going to be quite a good day,” said Menonn.

“I had a dream last night,” commented Rhea. “That was about a good day, I think, and there was something about an empire and some ginger buns.”

The others all smiled. Jade then came into the hall, all excited.

“Look what they’ve cooked up in the kitchen!” she exclaimed, putting a hot plate of freshly made ginger buns on the table.

Everybody looked back at Rhea.

“A good day, an empire, and some ginger buns?” said Clarne slowly.

“They nice,” said Illmith, her mouth full already.

“Come on then,” said Naylen. “Since it’s going to be such a good day, let’s not waste it sitting about in here. We all know what we’re doing, and we’re all to meet back here tonight before it gets dark.”

“Yes sir,” said all the children together.

“And one more thing,” said Naylen.

They all looked at him.

“Everyone is to be careful and stay alert,” he said seriously. “It’s possible, but hopefully unlikely, that folk associated with the IllumiJex may be around, so watch out. Though to be honest, I haven’t a clue as to what they might look like.”

They all nodded. Clarne glanced across at Rhea, who was still busy with Illmith, eating ginger buns. For some reason, she felt suddenly afraid that this was the last time she’d ever see her friend alive, ever again. Rhea’s mention of a dream empire had also rattled her. This vast mythological goblin empire, whatever it was, seemed to be turning up everywhere at the moment. Oh dear, thought Clarne, I hope nothing too horrible happens.

And that was how this particular day started.

- Chapter 19 -
Strange Ships at WixWyn Harbour

“I say, that’s some ship they have over there,” remarked Brandon to Jade. “Let’s go and have a closer look.”

Jade was busy smelling the sea air. It was wonderful. She breathed in the pungent aroma of ocean water, mixed with that of drying seaweed. Just then a flock of seagulls started to fill the air, down near where some fishing boats had recently come to shore. Men were shouting and working as they hurried to unload the catch of the last few days, get it organised, and send it off to market before their valuable stocks of fish and crabs started to go all rotten. Every now and then, you could catch their voices on the cool steady breeze that blew off the water.

“...don’t just leave them barrels in the way ... Nimpus, you great numbskull ... get ‘em below deck ... and make sure ... crabs round your ears ... and don’t ever ... more time fixing nets ...”

Jade smiled. You could certainly get the gist of what the fishermen were going on about! I wonder who poor Nimpus is, she thought. I’ll probably never know.

“What was that?” then asked Jade, realising that Brandon had said something, but that she hadn’t a clue as to what it was.

Brandon sighed. Jade sure could be a bit of a daydreamer at times.

“I said, let’s go and look at the ship over there,” said Brandon, pointing right across the harbour. “It looks the most interesting one here.”

“Sorry. I was just enjoying the view,” said Jade. “I’ve never been here before.”

“You can enjoy the view along the way,” remarked Brandon.

“Come on then,” said Jade, “let’s go and see.”

The two children started walking along the vast wooden jetties and giant floating log platforms that made up the quayside. Gradually they headed toward the area where the warships were kept in dock.

This harbour at WixWyn is one of the best places ever, thought Jade. There was so much to see and take in, ships and boats, of all shapes and sizes, lighthouses, wooden cranes, and so many busy people! Brandon was also impressed by it all but he wasn’t here to enjoy the view. He was a treasure hunter, or so he kept telling himself, and he wanted to find out something interesting. The strange ship across the harbour was the best bet for that, he thought.

“Old Flance’s father used to work down here, you know,” said Brandon, as they walked along.

“Really, I’d never of guessed,” said Jade. “Did he go out and catch pirates?”

“I think he did, or so Naylen told me. We should ask Flance when we get back to RiftWood,” suggested Brandon. “He might have some interesting stories to tell.”

“Yes. I’m sure he’d love to tell someone about this lot,” said Jade, continuing to look around at all the work going on.

They were quite close to some of the harbour patrol vessels by now. These were small fast ships made of resin-treated collen wood, with streamlined bows and two main masts. They were used to keep the sea area around WixWyn free of troublemakers. With their cleverly designed triangular sails, there wasn’t much that could outrun them, on a good windy day.

Further along, were two full-sized WixWyn warships. Also made of treated collen wood, they were designed to sail further out to sea, and travel along the great trade routes that led north, south and west. These ships were really hated by pirates and buccaneers alike and for good reason. They were tough battleships and their crews were all fierce men. Definitely not the sort of thing you would take on in a hurry.

Sailing north along the coast would take you into the choppy waters that lay off the cooler lands of Grenhash. There was a large harbour, about seven or so days' journey away, called ArchBridge. A city with a notorious reputation for being a rough and wild place. Beyond there lay the Ice Seas of Rithin, and only a few people, mostly adventurers or complete nutters, ever bothered to sail around them.

Going south took you into the pleasant warm waters of Xulon and Lilliante, and if you kept going long enough, you got to Fendrak, the nearest port to the great city of Norridon. That was some trip. The sea was filled with strange exotic creatures, and the birds, rather than being simple seagulls, were all brightly coloured. Some even had four wings instead of two and were big enough to carry a man clean off a ship, so it paid to keep a good lookout.

Out west was the really strange island of Cillic. Travelling there was a dangerous voyage, even for an experienced sea captain with a good ship and a fine crew. First, you had to dodge the storms, that loved to scream their way across the open sea between the island and the mainland. They'd do their best to rip to shreds any ships that got in their way. But even worse were the huge Katchspen mountains on Cillic itself. These towered into the heavens like a huge wall of spires, over

three and a half thousand storeys high some people said. Their presence caused all kinds of freak weather to confront the naval traveller. Often, a treacherously icy wind had a habit of blowing straight down from the higher peaks, before racing out to sea like a freezing gale. So it was not uncommon for ships to come into port, looking as if they'd been attacked by mythical ice dragons, who breathed frost instead of fire. Thus vessels, with man-sized icicles hanging off the main rigging, would sometimes struggle into Cillic harbours, even if on land it was a nice hot sunny day. The Katchspen mountains were so high that you could see them from the tops of the White Towers at WixWyn, despite being many days sail away, and if you tried to climb them, the air would run out long before you ever reached the top. Countless legends and myths had surrounded the Katchspen mountains since the dawn of time, and probably would until the day the world ended.

“Corrr! I wouldn't like to meet one of those in battle,” said Brandon, as they walked past the first WixWyn warship.

It was called the 'Sea Sentinel' and was being restocked for its next tour of duty. A huge eye was painted on the ship's bow. This was done, so it was said by the local seamen, so the ship could see in fog. Brandon wasn't too convinced by that, however.

“That one has a nice name,” said Jade. “The 'Ocean Castle'. It reminds me a bit of that sad old castle we visited some time ago.”

The Ocean Castle was painted grey, and on deck were towers and turrets where tens of archers could fire barrages of deadly flame-tipped arrows at enemy vessels.

Brandon could now clearly see the ship that had first caught his eye. It was on the far side of the harbour, moored up on its own. Made of some dark wood, possibly from screne trees, it too was a warship, but a little smaller and different in design from those of WixWyn. Firstly, it had a really vicious-looking bronze-coated battering ram built into the front, and second, it looked as if rows of oars ran down the sides. There were masts with sails as well, so it could obviously travel in any weather. A couple of flags, fixed to the highest mast, fluttered gently in the breeze.

“Can you make those flag designs out?” asked Brandon to Jade.

“No, we’ll have to get nearer, but it must be an important ship, look at all those soldiers standing around it,” replied Jade.

“Perhaps we could get closer by going down there,” suggested Brandon, pointing toward what looked like a path across the log platforms by some huts.

“Would we be allowed?” ventured Jade. “I mean this whole place is a war centre. We might get arrested and thrown in jail for being spies! Or they might think we work for the pirates. Then they’d simply hang us straight away!”

“I doubt it. If anybody stops us, we’ll just say we’re two children, on a day out to the seaside, who are simply having a look around,” said Brandon cunningly.

The two friends moved along the jetty, past the huts, and went down several levels onto more of the floating platforms. They passed piles of rope, barrels, and wooden boxes, as well as many men and women working out in the sun. Soon they came to an area where what looked like two soldiers, wearing dark brown uniforms, were guarding the way forward. Brandon

could see the dark ship’s flags now. The top one was light blue, with the bright red silhouette of a bird upon it. A second flag below that was the same, except it was a darker shade of blue, and the bird was glittering gold.

“The top one is the flag of Cillic, I’m sure,” stated Brandon. “That’s their symbol, the Red Raven. Don’t know about the other though.”

“It looks important,” said Jade. “Maybe it’s a battle flag or something, and they’re about to go and fight some other ships!”

Brandon looked at the ship longingly. He thought it would be just fantastic to be captain of a vessel like that, and be able to sail it around the oceans of the world, looking for adventure and treasure.

“We could ask those guards about the flags,” he suggested.

“What, those guards!” exclaimed Jade. “They look a bit fierce.”

“I’m sure they’re fine, and anyway,” said Brandon with a glint in his eye, “I’ve got an idea.”

“Oh no!” moaned Jade. “We don’t want any trouble.”

But Brandon was off, walking straight toward the guards. Jade held back at first but decided, against her better judgement, to join her friend. Brandon’s ‘ideas’ were usually a recipe for absolute mayhem. The two guards noticed the children coming, and at once moved to the centre of the pathway, blocking it completely.

“And what would you be wanting, young man?” asked the first in a haughty-sounding voice.

“I, I mean, well, begging you pardon sirs, but me and my friend,” said Brandon, glancing at Jade, “were wondering about your ship. Do you use it to catch fish in?”

The second guard nearly burst out laughing.

“Catch fish in! Can you believe that!” he exclaimed to his partner, who was also smiling. “We bring a great warship of the Cillic Navy all the way over to WixWyn, and the local children think we use it to catch fish! The sooner we go home the better!”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that,” said Brandon, holding his hands up. “I thought you might use it to catch big fish, like sharks and whales, not just crabs and shrimps.”

“O my goodness!” roared the second soldier in absolute laughter. “Sharks and whales now is it! You tell him Drenas. I don’t think I’ll be able to stand up much longer!”

“My dear boy,” started up Drenas, with a smirk on his face, “allow me to inform you that this fine and glorious vessel, that you see before your very eyes, is the personal transport of her Royal Highness, the Princess Qirune, of the Great Island Kingdom of Cillic.”

“Who’s she?” asked Jade, who genuinely didn’t know but had plucked up the courage to say something. “Has she come on a long voyage seeking a handsome prince to marry?”

“Who’s Princess Qirune? Don’t these children know anything? Why don’t you explain it to the young lady, Torenn,” said Drenas to his partner.

“Why I would be delighted to,” said Torenn, turning to Jade. “Princess Qirune is the sole heir to the Imperial Throne of Cillic, and since her father is very ill, and her mother already dead, she will probably be queen before this summer ends. Therefore, before she takes upon herself this great and high office, she has come to enjoy this supposedly fair city for a few days, as well as act her part in some matters of state.”

“Gosh!” said Brandon.

“Wow!” said Jade.

“In fact,” continued Torenn, “you can tell that we are a ship bearing royal persons by the blue and gold emblem upon our mast.”

“A royal ship!” said Brandon wide-eyed. “Does it have a name?”

“Of course. Our ship is called the ‘Ice Raven’ since we have a habit of coming upon our enemies with a cold and terrible fury,” answered Drenas proudly, “but that’s only after we’ve caught our day’s quota of fish of course!”

Both soldiers burst out laughing again. Brandon decided that he’d pushed his luck far enough, and nudged Jade to indicate that they should get moving.

“Thank you sirs, I’ll try and remember that,” said Brandon.

“Thank you,” chimed in Jade, “and be sure to give our best wishes to her Royal Highness, the Princess Qirune, when she ascends to the throne!”

“Indeed we will,” said Torenn, who even gave Jade a slight bow.

Brandon and Jade then walked quickly off. Brandon was quite pleased with the little stunt they’d managed to get away with, pretending to be idiots and yet still getting some important information about the ship.

“You did quite well there,” said Brandon kindly to Jade.

“It was still a silly idea,” replied Jade, but secretly she was pleased with how well she had played her part.

“We should head off and find the others,” said Brandon.

Thus the two friends walked back along the quayside, with Jade still busy looking about at all the things there were to see.

Once off the wooden platforms, she had a final glance around. On the other side of the harbour, away from the Cillic ship, lay another small vessel, moored up on its own.

“Look, there’s a coach and horses right on the deck of that little ship over there,” said Jade.

Brandon peered across. She was right. In fact, it looked as if you could drive the coach and horses directly on or off the boat. The stern had been flattened, and large wooden ramps connected the deck to the quayside.

“Maybe it’s a sort of coach ferry for important people,” suggested Brandon. “You know, for folks who are too rich, or too posh, to be bothered to actually get out of a coach, to make a harbour crossing.”

“Perhaps,” responded Jade, now losing interest. “I wonder what the others have been up to.”

“Nothing much I shouldn’t wonder,” commented Brandon.

- Chapter 20 -
Tree Tops and a Reluctant Princess

Rhea and Naylen sat in the wooden rail cart, as several thick ropes hauled it vertically toward the top of the most gigantic wooden super-structure anywhere in WixingDale. The ropes were linked to a huge winch far below, being operated by several donkeys, who were made to walk round and round in circles all day long by their owners. Both the ropes and the cart creaked worryingly.

“Is this thing safe?” asked Naylen, who’d been talked into this mad caper by Rhea.

“I’ve no idea, but it looks the best thing ever!” she replied, glancing around.

As far as many people were concerned, the Wooden Labyrinth of WixWyn was the best thing ever. Built within and around a large hollow of land, that was surrounded on three sides by steeply sloping hills, it was billed as the fastest rail cart ride on the whole of Mi-Rethyn.

“We’re certainly getting high,” commented Naylen, looking down and thinking the people below looked like ants, and small ants at that.

“We have to go higher yet,” said Rhea. “I think we’re heading for that platform way up in this tree.”

The tree was gigantic. It, along with three other similarly high prakenna trees, were the ingenious centre of the rail cart ride. The man who’d designed it, one Mr Brentil Jic-Riven, had realised that the wood of living trees was much stronger than that of dead ones. Therefore, if you tied the four trees together,

you could use them, along with other supports built into the hillsides, to make the most fantastic fairground ride anywhere.

Each of the trees was over forty storeys high, so only the White Towers were taller in all of WixWyn. The ride itself started about thirty storeys above ground, and the track was a crazy mass of twisted wood, rope and metal. Since the prakenna trees were over one thousand five hundred years old, they had already proved themselves able to withstand any weather conditions possible. Hence, despite its appearance, the rail cart ride was in fact extremely robust in its design and construction, and was stable even during high winds.

“Here at last,” said Naylen, as their cart rose into the starting platform. “We’re practically in the sky!”

“Looks like you can go higher still,” said Rhea, pointing.

Naylen saw the sign labelled ‘Flying Carpet - This Way’. It pointed toward a simple rope ladder.

“Where does that go?” he asked the middle-aged man at the top, who Naylen thought might be an attendant or something.

“Oh, good day sir, my name is Alfin, and that sir leads up to the wooden platform we have suspended between the tops of the four trees. We call it the Flying Carpet. Would you want to see it?”

“Yes please, we would,” said Rhea, thinking it to be very intriguing.

The girl jumped out of the wooden cart and encouraged Naylen to do the same.

“Come on!” said Rhea excitedly. “We can catch another cart down. Let’s see this!”

“If we must,” replied Naylen reluctantly.

“The young lady seems quite spirited if you don’t mind me saying so,” said Alfin, smiling.

“You have no idea,” remarked Naylen in reply.

“Well, you just climb the rope ladder and then walk along the rickety old plank bridge that’s strung up there. But try not to fall off, there’s not a great deal to hold onto I’m afraid,” informed Alfin.

“Thanks for the tip,” said Naylen, who didn’t like the sound of this one bit.

But Rhea was off, so he had no choice other than to follow after her. The rope ladder led up and up into the higher branches of the giant prakenna tree. Looking directly down you could see the vast complex track work of the rail cart ride, spiralling into the unfathomable distances below. The scene was enough to make even the bravest person giddy. After quite a climb, the rope ladder led to another platform and fixed to this, was one end of a very frail-looking rope and plank bridge. The two adventurers stood on the platform structure looking out.

“They have got to be joking!” cried Naylen.

“That is something, isn’t it!” exclaimed Rhea.

The flimsy plank bridge led straight out, and slightly down, to where a final platform of wood appeared to be suspended in the middle of the sky! As Alfin had said, only four ropes, tied across the vast distances between the tree-tops, kept it from falling. Now at nearly forty storeys up, the giddy sensation of being so far above ground started to make Rhea’s head spin.

“Just stay here till you get used to it,” Naylen advised. “Then we’ll try the bridge.”

A short while later, twelve-year-old Rhea stepped out onto the planks making up the bridge. She felt like she was walking on thin air. Soon Naylen joined her, and the two moved with care over the vast gulf below them. The bridge had a nasty habit of swinging from side to side as you stepped on its planks, but slowly they made progress toward their goal.

Once on the Flying Carpet, the view was utterly fantastic! You could see all of the city of WixWyn, with the White Towers looking magnificent, and the whole of the harbour was within your gaze too. What was more, at that precise moment, the sun happened to be reflecting off the shimmering sea in such a way as to give it the appearance of a thousand million diamonds, all sparkling with rainbow-like colours. It was a sight that belonged in fairyland.

“This is really unbelievable!” gasped Rhea.

Naylen just looked around in wonder. He’d seen many things in his time, but standing on a few planks of wood, simply lashed together, and tied between four of what must be the tallest trees in the whole wide world, with nothing to hold onto other than your wits, was truly a stellar experience!

The dazzling colours of the sun continued to sparkle like living gemstones. Naylen and Rhea looked at each other. What a find! Not all treasure was the sort you could pick up, put in your pockets, and take home. This sight, this view, was as valuable as any other artefact or fortune they could possibly hope to encounter, and it would live in their minds for a long time to come. But after a long gaze at everything, the two adventurers decided it was time to move on.

Naylen and Rhea trod carefully back over the rope and plank bridge to the tree top, and then started the climb down

the rope ladder. Rhea wondered then about the runes Jade had found. This was one of the Labyrinths of WixWyn, but as wonderful as the Flying Carpet was, they had seen nothing that connected it with the candlestick mystery. However, as they reached the platform where the cart rides started, both of them could hear raised voices, and what sounded like a fierce argument.

“Let me make this very clear. If Her Royal Highness so much as scratches a fingernail on this rickety death trap of a ride, then I’ll cut your head off and have it placed upon a spike, right outside our royal palace gate!” said an armed soldier, waving his sword in Alfin’s direction.

Alfin didn’t look at all happy.

“Is there a problem?” asked Naylen in a serious tone of voice.

“Indeed there is,” said a second soldier, “but you would be advised to stay well out of this, and be on your way.”

Naylen surveyed the scene. Three soldiers stood between poor Alfin and what looked like a young girl about Rhea’s age. The soldiers all had swords and shields, and you could tell just by looking at them, that they were probably elite troops, and not simply your regular guards. The girl, standing to one side, was well dressed but not overly so. However, the most striking thing about her was the incredible ornate gold headband she was wearing. At its centre, red as you could imagine, was the Red Raven emblem of Cillic. This gave Naylen a big clue as to who she might be, and he studied the young girl for a few moments. She looked rather thin and pale, almost ill you might say. The girl soon noticed that he was looking at her, so Naylen

then decided to try and help sort things out, and turned to the guards.

“May I take it that you are the personal bodyguard of Her Royal Highness, The Princess Qirune?” asked Naylen in a respectful tone of voice.

One of the guards looked back at him.

“Indeed you may,” he said.

“Then may I have the honour of speaking with Her Royal Highness, face to face?” Naylen continued.

The guard looked across at the young princess. She thought for a moment or two. This stranger did at least seem to be more sensible than her soldiers. She raised her left hand slightly, the signal for acceptance. The guard backed off and allowed Naylen to approach the girl.

“Just you be careful,” said the guard, waving his sword menacingly.

Naylen gathered his wits together.

“Your Royal Highness,” he said, bowing, “may I be so bold as to present myself, Naylen Shaw, and my good and loyal friend, Rhea Cantonell, as your humble servants.”

“Indeed you may,” said Qirune softly, glancing across to look at Rhea, who curtsied.

Qirune rapidly sensed that Rhea was a good sort, the kind of person she would probably like to have as a friend if she didn’t have to spend all her time being a princess.

“Were you planning to travel upon this wooden contraption?” addressed Qirune to Rhea, in a stately tone of voice.

Rhea was somewhat shocked and tongue-tied at being suddenly addressed by a real live princess and wasn’t too sure

how to answer. She looked at the Cillic guards, who were now all looking at her.

“Oh yes, Your Royal Highness!” Rhea blurted out. “Me and my friend were planning to go right about now!”

Qirune looked downcast at the ground.

“My guards declare that it would be certain death to ride upon this marvel of construction, and don’t want to allow me to do so, for the sake of my personal safety,” said Qirune sadly.

Rhea gazed in wonder at the golden ornate headband that Qirune was wearing. Its dazzling Red Raven emblem almost shone upon her forehead. Somehow, Rhea thought, it gave the frail-looking princess an aura of real power. She then glanced at the start of the Labyrinth track, which began with a gentle slope, but then plunged alarmingly into the depths below. You would need some guts to ride this thing voluntarily, and Rhea genuinely wondered if Qirune was really up to it. She didn’t look very strong.

“I think it would be just fantastic to ride this thing,” said Rhea, “but obviously it’s not for the faint-hearted.”

Qirune’s guards all flushed red in anger. Who did this girl think she was? Insulting a member of the Cillic Royal Family? Suggesting that they were lacking in courage and spirit? Faint-hearted indeed! Had this Rhea Cantonnell no idea of the perils and dangers they faced at sea, every time they journeyed from Cillic to the mainland, or back again? All three guards had their eyes fixed on Qirune now. Perhaps she would order them to cut this Rhea’s head off on the spot, or maybe signal her to be thrown from the top of the tree. That would be a fitting punishment. Naylen decided he better say something quickly, and that it had better be good.

“What my friend is saying, of course,” said Naylen carefully, “is that she would be honoured to accompany the princess on this ride unless, of course, her guards think it too dangerous.”

The guards changed their tune entirely at this point.

“I see,” said the one who appeared to be the leader of the three. “Well if her Royal Highness wishes to ride, then we can see no problem!”

Qirune relaxed. She realised then that Rhea hadn’t meant to insult her.

“I’m dreadfully sorry, Your Royal Highness,” said Rhea, somewhat flustered but highly relieved. “I didn’t mean to imply you were too afraid to ride.”

The princess decided that she’d wasted enough time up here.

“Would you like to come with me now?” Qirune asked Rhea in a quiet tone.

Rhea looked at Naylen, who nodded.

“Of course. Let’s go,” she answered.

Alfin, who’d never had such a difficult crowd of customers to deal with, was very relieved that someone was finally going to ride.

“If you’ll just step this way girls, err, I mean Your Royal Highnesses,” said Alfin, who was not quite sure who was royal and who wasn’t anymore, “then we have a cart all ready and waiting for you.”

One of Qirune’s guards helped her step into the wooden cart, while Rhea sat down next to her. Now closer to the princess, Rhea could feel there was something very strange about this Qirune, but couldn’t tell what it was. But this is not

really a good time for thinking, thought Rhea, as two padded metal safety bars were fixed in place. The wooden carts had a simple padded low bench on which you sat, complete with a headrest, and the two bars which passed across the waist and thighs of people riding, so they couldn't fall out. Other than that, you just held onto the simple rail in front of you.

"Is that comfortable?" asked Alfin. "You must say if it isn't, or else you'll end up all battered about."

The two girls looked at each other. They were fine.

"Are you ready?" asked Naylen, smiling.

"Definitely," said Rhea.

"Perhaps the young lady should remove her headband," suggested Alfin. "You don't want it falling off during the ride."

Qirune paused. The ornate golden headband was one of the most valuable treasures in all of Cillic. Whole books had been written about its origins and history, and how the glittering Red Raven came to symbolise the Cillic people. It was said by some to contain vast magical power, but Qirune wasn't sure about that. She didn't like magic. Even so, it was the Cillic symbol of royalty and never, never, could it afford to be lost. Qirune slowly removed the headband and offered it to Naylen.

"Do you promise to guard it with your life?" she asked quite seriously.

Naylen took hold of the headband carefully.

"With my life," he answered, bowing to Qirune.

Rhea wondered if Qirune would look a bit more ordinary without the headband on. However, almost as dazzling as the real thing, was another Red Raven marked indelibly into Qirune's forehead. So the thin young girl, seated next to her, was still Princess Qirune of Cillic, headband or not. Rhea was

starting to not believe what was going on. Here she was, sitting on top of the largest fairground ride possibly on the planet, with a mysterious princess from some faraway island about which she knew almost nothing. Life was certainly throwing up some strange surprises at the moment.

Qirune looked around. It was too late to back out now, and she sure was glad this girl Rhea had shown up when she did. Going on this thing alone would have been all too much for her.

"We will meet Your Royal Highness at the bottom," said one of her guards. "May your ship endure the storm!"

It was a ritual saying that was always proclaimed over a sea vessel that left Cillic on the dangerous journey to the mainland. Alfin took the wooden block out from the front of the cart and gave it a simple push. The cart was free.

- Chapter 21 -
The Pictures in the Vaxen Gallery

Clarne, Illmith and Menonn stood outside the vast heavy entrance gates to the Vaxen family estate.

“Wow! They must have some money!” said Menonn. “Would you just look at this place!”

The house looked more like an imperial palace than a family residence. Thick columns of white marble, carved to resemble mythical creatures, held up the front section, and it was obvious that inside that alone there must be dozens of halls and hundreds of rooms. Other sections of the house fanned away from this, far into the huge grounds. The architecture was fabulous. Towers, statues, buttresses, and sweeping arches were here in abundance. Whoever had designed this edifice certainly knew their stuff.

“You could probably fit the entire RiftWood Academy in just the front courtyard,” mused Clarne.

Illmith looked out from under her thin, pale blue cape. It had been decided that it would be better if she went about in disguise, when out in the open. However, the hot sunny weather meant she couldn't just wrap up in loads of capes, jumpers and scarves. That would look suspicious in itself. Therefore she was wearing a long loose blue skirt, thin white gloves over her hands, and the light cape which covered her arms and most of her head. It was a good disguise. All the blue she had on meant that if you did happen to glance at her pale blue face, you almost thought nothing of it. However they were taking no chances, and Illmith always stood to one side looking

away from people, and let Clarne and Menonn do any talking that may be required.

If anybody did stop them, then Clarne and Menonn had a few tall stories they planned to tell about strange people visiting from faraway lands, to try and explain why a blue-skinned girl was wandering around the city of WixWyn. Though thinking about it, those tall stories were more or less true.

“How will we ever get in?” asked Menonn.

“I don't know. Let's just watch and see what goes on. Perhaps we'll get an idea,” suggested Clarne.

That seemed good to Menonn and Illmith, so they all sat under some shady trees and observed that which was happening. Soon a large group of children, led by a few adults, came slowly down the street and toward the gates. The party were all dressed in smart black and red uniforms.

“Who they?” asked Illmith.

“Who cares?” said Clarne. “Let's slip in behind them. Hopefully, no one will notice us.”

“Not notice?” hissed Illmith. “They wear uniform, we don't. We stand out like gold in mud.”

“And I could never keep up,” added Menonn.

“I suppose not,” said Clarne disappointedly.

The large group was in fact a choir that was due to sing that night in one of the Vaxen house halls. Not that Illmith, Clarne or Menonn cared much about that. However, a low flat cart full of musical instruments then pulled up at the Vaxen gatehouse. The driver started having a chat with the man inside.

“Let's jump on board that cart!” suggested Clarne.

“But they see us clear as day,” said Illmith.

“Yes, but we can pretend to be helpers who are going to carry all the instruments about,” responded Clarne.

“Oh yeah!” said Menonn. “I can really do that.”

“All right. Why don’t you pretend to be the choir conductor, checking to see if the musical instruments are of the right quality? Your stick might just about pass off as a musical conductor’s cane.”

“Now you’re being silly,” said Menonn.

“Look,” said Clarne, “we can’t just sit here all day. We’ve got to start acting like real adventurers!”

Clarne couldn’t remember feeling so well for ages and ages, and hence she didn’t want to waste any more of this day than she had to. So while the driver talked away, the three children sneaked onto the low cart and lay down at the back. There were even some cloth covers and before you knew it, all three had vanished from sight. The driver wished the gatekeeper well and the cart then rumbled through the vast gates into the great Vaxen house estate. Passing around the side of the imperial entrance, the cart stopped just beyond some side doors that led into one of the house wings. Creeping off, the children waited for the driver to go inside, and then crept along the wall, under some windows, to another door. It was locked.

“Let’s go on,” whispered Clarne. “One of these must open.”

Sure enough, the next one did.

“Yes!” said Clarne, as the door handle clicked easily to the open position.

Creeping inside, they instantly heard voices, and immediately all three vanished, behind a heavy open wooden door to the left, until they thought the coast was clear.

“If anybody catches us, we’re dead meat!” whispered Menonn.

“Now what?” whispered Illmith.

“I don’t know,” said Clarne quietly.

“Let’s try those stairs,” said Menonn pointing, having decided that now they were actually inside, he might as well stop worrying about getting caught and start acting like a real adventurer himself. “They might go somewhere interesting,” he continued.

They did.

The picture gallery, at the top of this huge staircase, was a whole series of big airy interconnected rooms, all of which had high ceilings and great enormous square windows. That way the pictures could be more easily seen and appreciated for what they were, outstanding examples of artistic skill. Many were portraits of various members of the old and very important Vaxen family. There were Earls, Barons, Baronesses, Dukes, Knights, Dames, Lords and many others.

“The Duke of Vaxen-Rift in 1758,” said Menonn looking at one picture in particular.

“What Vaxen-Rift?” asked Illmith.

“Oh, it’s an old name for this whole region, all the way from the coast to the other side of the Rift Wood,” said Menonn. “Today we usually call it Wixingdale.”

“Vaxen-Rift used to be bigger in the past,” said Clarne. “I bet that sad old castle was originally part of Vaxen-Rift once, but now it’s outside of Wixingdale altogether.”

Menonn nodded.

“So the RiftWood School was once ruled from this house. There’s an interesting thought,” he said.

Illmith was now looking at some other paintings.

“They powerful people,” she commented.

That was true. The Vaxen family had once been more-or-less kings of this whole region. They had done whatever they wanted.

Clarne left the other two and wandered into another of the big airy rooms. This one had an eerie stillness to it. Clarne remembered Rhea telling her about the atmosphere of the old castle, how it had seemed so sad. I wonder if it was anything like this, she thought.

The pictures here were of children and young adults rather than the more stately Dukes and Earls of the previous room. She stopped at a portrait of a handsome young man, sword in hand, fierce look upon his face. In the lower-left corner was a name, ‘Maldreth Vaxen’. Clarne looked at the picture again. The young man’s eyes appeared very hard and full of pride. She moved on.

Another one that caught her attention was a portrait of a beautiful young woman with long blond hair and fine regal features. The name painted on this particular picture was ‘Xavia Vaxen’. The date was 1907. That was over two-hundred years ago. To Clarne it was an odd feeling, seeing all these people who’d once lived in this great house, but who were now surely all dead.

She was about to wander into another room, but a picture at the far end of this one caught her attention. Clarne started to move toward it and noticed how the atmosphere of sadness seemed to get stronger as she stepped closer to the painting.

Nearer and nearer she came. The girl in the portrait looked very forlorn indeed, dressed in red, with dark brown hair fashioned in a single long plat. The sense of misery was definitely radiating from this particular painting. But why?

Looking at the caption, Clarne saw the name. It read ‘Rudine Vaxen, 2006’. Wow! The date at the moment was 2114, two thousand one hundred and fourteen years since the Aeon of Dark Mist had begun. That meant this picture of Rudine was one hundred and eight years old. Clarne stared at the girl mounted on the wall. So this was the Rudine they had all been thinking about, ever since that trip to the sad old castle. What was so special about her? Why did she emanate such sadness and sorrow?

Clarne stared at the picture for the longest time. There must be something significant about it surely. But she could see nothing. It was a portrait of a girl about sixteen years of age. A sad-looking girl yes. But just a girl. Clarne looked into the background, in case something had been hidden there by the original artist, but there was nothing obvious. It looked like part of the Vaxen house gardens. Hedges, flowers, trees. All very innocent. Menonn and Illmith both wandered up.

“Is this her then?” asked Menonn. “Our mystery lady, Rudine Vaxen.”

Clarne nodded.

“She look very sad,” said Illmith.

“Yes,” said Clarne, “and there’s something about this picture but I can’t see what it is.”

They all looked and looked and commented and remarked on everything possible. The clothes Rudine was wearing, were they possibly a uniform of some secret organisation? The

shadows next to the trees, did they possibly indicate the presence of a secret tree house? The way her left hand looked ever so slightly odd, were her fingers curled in a secret Vaxen hand message? But in the end, they had to admit defeat. There was nothing unusual they could see in the painting.

Very reluctantly, Clarne left the portrait of Rudine and followed Menonn and Illmith into another room. She felt they should have found something of vital importance but they had nothing. I bet Rhea would have noticed something immediately, Clarne thought sadly.

In the next room were more pictures of children, sometimes alone, often in small groups. Illmith was studying a trio of young boys standing outside by a couple of trees. The artist had obviously taken great care to make the scene look very lifelike. There were even cobwebs in the leaves of the lower tree branches if you looked closely enough to see them. The names of the boys had been Nidel, Cest and Lugoc, and all were related in some way to the Vaxen family. The picture was dated 1997. Perhaps they had known Rudine thought Illmith. She also found it strange to think about people who must now surely have died. Menonn walked up to Clarne.

“We should try and sneak into a library, or something similar, and see what’s in there,” he suggested.

Clarne nodded but didn’t really want to go. She glanced back at the archway into the other room, the one containing the portrait of Rudine, and shook her head. They had missed something important, she just knew it. Wandering through more gallery rooms, the three children headed on.

“And who are you?” said Clarne to herself, in some surprise.

Before her lay the portrait of a lone young girl, a radiant smile on her face, a real sparkle in her eyes. She looked so happy, so full of life. Clarne guessed she was about ten years in age, hence the picture reminded her a bit of Jade. She was ten, and nearly always in a cheerful mood. It was certainly the complete opposite of the picture of Rudine. Looking at the caption, it read ‘Valaretta Rudine Vaxen, 1999’.

Clarne was shocked. How could this bright happy Valaretta Vaxen be the same person as the sad-looking Rudine they had seen earlier? Something truly terrible must have happened to the girl, Clarne thought. Something so awful that she’d dropped her first name as if it belonged to a former life. She looked at the picture of Valaretta again. What is your secret, she asked herself.

Clarne’s eyes searched over the painting. Valaretta was sitting in a gorgeous-looking regal green dress. Next to her stood a small table with some common-looking objects on it. The scene was set inside a room, and the only window in the picture again looked out over what appeared to be the Vaxen house gardens. One of the White Towers of WixWyn was clearly visible. All very interesting but not very important.

What about the girl herself? Clarne studied her face carefully. Valaretta had the kind of expression that someone makes when they are hiding something from you, that you want to know. It was a smirk and not a smile Clarne decided. But what was she hiding? Clarne strangely felt that the girl in the picture was playing a game with her. She looked over the portrait again. Both the girl’s hands were closed as they lay folded on her lap. I bet she’s got something in one of them, thought Clarne. But what? It can’t be very big, whatever it is.

Just then, one of the objects on the table in the picture caught Clarne's eye. It was a small golden bell, the sort important people have when they want to call a servant. If you needed help of any sort, you rang the bell, and servants would come running.

A strange feeling came over Clarne. Everything around seemed to lose its focus, while the picture in front now completely filled her vision as if it were the only thing that mattered in all the world. The small bell on the table was almost glowing with brightness and significance. Clarne thought through carefully what she'd just been thinking about. To get help you would ring the bell. Even as these words passed through her mind, Clarne was certain she could hear the faint sound of a bell being rung. Ring! Ring! Ring!

A cold sensation went straight through Clarne's guts, like a surgeon's knife. Thinking about the picture again, it all made so much sense. It was all so obvious! Clarne now knew with total certainty what Valaretta was holding in her hand. In her left hand. The other was empty. The world then drifted back into focus, with the picture receding from her view, and going back to being just a large portrait, fixed to the wall.

Clarne's mind raced away with her newfound knowledge, but the girl who'd been unwell for most of the last two years couldn't take the strain. So despite feeling much better that morning, her world soon spun out of control, and fainting rapidly, she fell to the floor with a thud.

Menonn and Illmith also heard the bell ring and looked with horror as Clarne collapsed. It was a servant bell that was ringing! The one fixed to the wall at the other end of the picture gallery and operated by a string. Menonn remembered seeing it

there. Next, footsteps began to echo through the large airy rooms. This was a disaster! Someone was coming. It was time to hide!

One of the things taught at RiftWood was how to become unseen very quickly, a rather useful ability when hunting for hoards of treasure. Hence Menonn told Illmith to pull Clarne straight under a nearby table, with a long cloth on it, and then she and Menonn hid behind a solid wooden door, not far away.

A female servant walked through the gallery. Fortunately, she was in a bit of a rush to get somewhere, so didn't bother looking about as she went. Once her footsteps had faded away, Illmith and Menonn crept out from their hiding place.

"She alright?" asked Illmith about Clarne, in a concerned version of her off-key voice.

"I think so. She often has fainting spells," said Menonn, glancing around nervously. "She should come to in a bit."

- Chapter 22 -
A Rail Cart Ride Beyond Belief

Brentil Jic-Riven, the architect of the WixWyn Wooden Labyrinth, had built the thing as a demonstration of his own great engineering brilliance. He'd been, and still was from time to time, a renowned teacher at the WixWyn Academy of Naval Construction, and had wanted to show just what was possible if you put your mind to it. The building and running costs of the Labyrinth had been paid for with gold, and other treasures, looted from pirate ships by the WixWyn fleet of warships. Many of the clever ideas that made the Labyrinth work, were now being used in ship design, such as the correct ways to combine the strength of both wood and rope to make something far stronger than both.

The Labyrinth carts used nothing but gravity to make them go. Three sets of wheels held them on the rails, and all the axles were dabbled with fish oil to make them run smoothly. The idea was to get maximum running force out of nothing more than sheer momentum. To say that he'd succeeded was an understatement if ever there was one. But that wasn't all. There were further plans to make the ride faster still, by constructing a huge catapult along the initial slope, to give the rail carts a really explosive start to their journey down! That would be the future.

In the present, Rhea and Qirune both held on for dear life as their wooden rail cart screamed through a tight bend up on its side, and then turned completely upside down as it thundered through a huge oval loop. You could feel the

enormous wooden super-structure, that was all held together with masses of rope, creek and bend under the strain. The cart rattled like nothing either of them had ever experienced before in their entire lives. Soon the trunks of the four great trees, upon which the thing was built, were flashing back and forth before the girls, as the track interleaved between them in a completely crazy manner. At one point it spiralled round and round and round one of the trunks, and at the speed you were going, you almost felt your bones would break from the strain!

The view from the low-set cart was breathtaking. The track seemed to just fly under you as you hurtled along at a near out-of-control speed. In one place, said track went up and up as it coiled around another huge trunk, but just as you thought you might stop, it careered off at a near-impossible angle down again. So before you knew it, you were almost in free fall, moving many times faster than a galloping horse, not that anyone had ever managed to accurately measure the precise speed of this thing before.

Qirune was trying hard not to be sick. Rhea, who was a little more robust, was scared out of her wits. But before she had much time to think about it, the track swept into a vast sweeping curve, with the cart now flying almost sideways through the air. Both girls screamed and screamed as the force caused by the curving track made them press hard into the small bench they were sitting on, and all their blood rushed down to their feet. The thrill of this thing was just unbelievable! The cart continued to thunder along the huge curved bank until it was virtually running at blackout speed. Finally, it swept out into a straight line and sped at lightning velocity through a long, long trough of water, that acted as a braking system.

Liquid sprayed up in all directions, and both girls ended up getting rather soaked! Eventually, the rail cart rolled to a complete standstill.

The two girls attempted to recover, but it wasn't easy. Rhea managed to pull the lock pins out from under the two guard bars and stagger out. But she fell over immediately on trying to stand up. Qirune didn't even think about trying to move. The world around her whirled about like a child's spinning top.

"Did you have a nice ride, young lady?" said a calm voice near Rhea.

"I think so," stammered Rhea, not really aware of who was speaking to her, "but it was a bit much though."

"I wouldn't say that. You seem to have survived quite well, but I'm not so sure if the same could be said of your friend, however."

Rhea could see now that the voice came from a young man dressed in a dark grey cape. Another darkly dressed man was over by Qirune, helping her out of the rail cart.

"No! You can't touch her, she's a princess!" said Rhea suddenly, across to the second man.

"We know who she is," said the young man in grey. "That's why we're here."

"Are you more of her guards then?"

"Not exactly," said the young man in a sly tone.

Rhea glanced back to where Qirune was. The second man was now carrying the frail princess over to a waiting coach. A third man with a small yapping dog opened one of its doors. She looks as good as dead, thought Rhea. Alarm rushed through her now.

"What have you done!" cried out Rhea, desperately trying to get to her feet.

"I wouldn't move if I were you," said the young man.

The sword point now at Rhea's throat told her she was in deep, deep trouble. She froze instantly and decided to remain sitting on the ground.

"Let this be a warning to you, young lady, to not get involved in things that don't concern you."

Rhea looked up, along the sword blade, toward the face of the young man who was threatening her life. He had a slightly dark complexion with jet-black hair, very handsome actually. And he didn't seem at all like a mindless thug, but Rhea could certainly sense the danger in him.

"Qirune's guards will soon be here, and then you'll be for it," she said in a low, yet nervous tone.

"By the time those fools arrive, we will be long gone!" remarked the young man, with a smirk on his face.

The door on the coach slammed shut and the driver whipped the horses. They set off at once, taking the sole heir to the throne of Cillic with them. Rhea watched in despair as the coach receded away, before turning completely out of sight.

"All too easy," said the young man, with an even bigger smirk on his face. "An unguarded princess, dazzled from a rail cart ride, with just a simple girl like you to look after her. And I thought this kidnapping was going to be a hard assignment."

"Did you kill her?" asked Rhea, with fear in her voice.

"No. We just used a special liquid mixture to force her to sleep. She'll be fine."

Rhea guessed that Qirune was going to be anything but fine. The sound of people running came from behind them. It was Naylen and the three elite guards. Rhea attempted a smile.

“Maybe it was not so easy,” she said.

The young man knew his time was up. He locked eyes with Rhea.

“You seem like a nice bright girl, and it would be a real shame for you to get hurt, so if I were you, I’d stay away from this particular princess, and everything to do with her.”

The young man took his sword tip away from Rhea’s throat, and ran over to a chariot, waiting behind a couple of trees. Rhea hadn’t noticed it before, but in a flash, he was off at lightning speed. The girl was then left sitting all alone with the words ‘this particular princess’ echoing through her mind. Oh no! Rhea suddenly realised the significance of the blue julnave princess playing piece, that had so fixated her attention back at RiftWood. So that’s why I felt so strange sitting next to Qirune. She’s a part of this mystery too. But now she’s gone! Kidnapped by a dashing caped crusader.

“Where’s Her Royal Highness?” shouted one of Qirune’s guards, looking around in all directions.

Rhea was still thinking about the young man who’d threatened her, but the anxiety of the guards helped the girl to snap back into reality.

“They kidnapped her!” shouted Rhea, suddenly standing up. “Some men in a big black coach came and took her, and this other young man in a chariot was with them as well!”

“You what!” shouted the guard, turning on Rhea like she was an enemy soldier.

Rhea tried to back off, but soon all three of Qirune’s guards were surrounding her, shouting and yelling at the tops of their voices, in an effort to get some answers.

“It wasn’t my fault!” said the girl, almost in tears. “They had swords and some mixture stuff.”

Naylen went and stood in front of Rhea.

“Just calm down,” he suggested to the men.

“Calm down!” shouted the lead guard. “Calm down! We’re all going to lose our heads for this!”

Possibly a good thing, thought Naylen.

“I told you not to let her ride in this stupid thing,” said the second guard, giving the rail cart a good hard kick, “but would you listen? No!”

Brandon and Jade wandered through the small trees, dotted across one of WixWyn’s many parks. They’d been nearly run over, a few moments earlier, by some mad fool driving a sleek black coach. Before that, they had, as previously agreed, waited at midday by the sundial next to the fountain in the WixWyn vegetable market. It was a busy spot, with people milling about, market traders shouting out what they had for sale, and even a few animals adding their own contribution to the noise and commotion! However, Naylen and Rhea never showed up, so Brandon and Jade decided to go to the Wooden Labyrinth themselves. Brandon soon recognised Naylen and Rhea dead ahead. They seemed to be in a certain amount of trouble.

“Now we know why the others never met us,” said Brandon to Jade, who could also see that something was clearly up.

“And who might this fool be?” asked one of the guards, as Brandon reached them.

“My friend,” said Rhea.

“What’s going on?” asked Jade, looking warily at the Cillic soldiers.

“Oh nothing much,” said Naylen. “We met this royal princess at the top of the ride, and she and Rhea went down it together. But waiting at the bottom were these wicked men, and now she’s been kidnapped in a big black coach, and this lot will have their heads cut off, once the people of Cillic find out what’s happened!”

“Wow!” said Jade. “We saw a black coach, didn’t we Brandon?”

“That’s right. Stupid thing nearly ran us over! It was heading toward the sea I think.”

“Well it won’t be heading that way for long,” said one of the guards scornfully. “You can’t ride a coach over water.”

“Yes you can!” exclaimed Jade.

Everyone looked at Jade, wondering if she’d lost her mind.

“We saw a small ship with a coach ramp on it!” cried out the little girl. “You could gallop straight on board, even with a carriage, if you wanted to!”

“She’s right,” said Brandon. “We saw it all this morning. I suppose the small ship is a ferry or something, that could meet up with a larger one elsewhere in the harbour, or even a pirate ship out at sea, and so allow kidnappers to move people from one ship to another quite easily!”

The guards all looked at each other aghast.

“Back to the Ice Raven!” they shouted out together.

A short while later, three chariots were racing through the parks and streets of WixWyn, in a madcap dash toward the harbour. Once there, their drivers didn’t bother slowing a jot, as they galloped at full speed onto the wooden platforms making up the quayside. People just dived for cover as the chariots flew past, their wheels thundering over various wooden planks and steps, on their way to the harbour’s far side. Hence, almost before they knew it, the Ice Raven’s hull was towering above Rhea, Jade and Brandon.

“Didn’t think we’d be back here so quickly,” said Brandon.

“No,” said Jade, looking up at the ship.

But this time they weren’t just being nosy. This time they were going to war.

- Chapter 23 -

Determined Warriors and Insane Ideas

“On the officer’s mark, starboard rowers push away!” ordered the Oar Master.

Ulence dropped his arm, and all the men on the ship’s starboard side pushed their oars against the dockside, thus causing the Ice Raven to drift ever so slowly out into the harbour water.

“On my mark, lift oars and stroke!” roared the Oar Master.

The men in the rowing galley began to pull. The Ice Raven glided slowly but surely away from the dockside, and headed out deeper into the harbour, and then toward the open sea. Elsewhere, all kinds of men, shouted all kinds of orders, to all sorts of people, all over the ship!

“... haul that rigging up ... but there’s no wind ... poor excuse ... get below and row then, you lazy dog ... bash you ... try and I’ll ... you’ll be sorry ... steer straight man ... blind as a bat ...”

Rhea, Jade and Brandon stood on the Ice Raven’s foredeck, looking ahead into the far distance, at a ship the Cillic soldiers were now calling the Dark Siren. A second, and much smaller vessel, could just about be seen pulling up alongside it. Various soldiers reckoned it was the same coach ferry which Brandon and Jade had seen earlier, but it was hard to tell. Despite everything though, it was still a lovely day. The sky was a perfect blue and the wind just a soft gentle breeze. Ideal weather for a rowing boat trip.

“Can you believe it!” exclaimed Brandon. “We’re actually going to war! What an adventure this is! We must be insane!”

“But we just have to get this Qirune back!” said Jade. “I can’t imagine what it must be like with those evil pirates.”

“I wonder if we’ll all be still alive, come late afternoon,” said Rhea quietly, staring ahead with her steel blue eyes.

The other two looked at her. She was right though. Battle on the high seas could cost them all their lives. It was a sobering thought.

“Do you two remember that sad old castle we visited some time ago?” asked Rhea, steadying herself as the Ice Raven rocked slightly.

“Of course we do,” said Brandon. “Why ask?”

“Well, I was just thinking that us being here now, is all because I decided to take us there then,” said Rhea.

“But you couldn’t have known what was going to happen,” offered Brandon. “No one could have done. None of this is your fault.”

“What did those runes mention again?” asked Rhea suddenly, above the commotion on the ship.

“Oh, they were about secrets beyond all darkness, and power beyond all magic,” said Jade.

Rhea’s mind tried to recall the dream she’d had the previous night. But a hazy sense of red, and some angry talk concerning an empire, were all she could bring into focus.

“Secrets and power versus darkness and magic,” said Rhea slowly to herself, as she gazed ahead at the Dark Siren far away.

Silence came over the three children as the Ice Raven moved forward through the water, the rowers below powering the ship like a single great heart that beat within its hull. Rhea looked at the other two, tears now welling up in her eyes.

“What’s up?” asked Jade, suddenly concerned.

“You two,” said Rhea.

“What about us?” asked Brandon, starting to feel a bit strange himself.

“You’re just such good friends,” said Rhea, “and I feel so lucky to have known you!”

Jade started crying then, and the two girls embraced.

“Come on, we’re not dead yet,” said Brandon, trying not to cry himself.

“No, I suppose not,” said Rhea snuffling.

“Look,” said Brandon. “We’ve all got caught up in something big, ever since we went to that sad old castle, and found that amazing red candlestick. And I’m sure we haven’t come this far just to all die today on a ship!”

“How can you be so sure?” asked Jade tearfully.

“The way I see it,” continued Brandon, “the lone-god’s promised goblin empire, that we’ve read about, is now starting to show its true power. And I bet each of you, a thousand bags of toffee, that it lets all three of us live for yet another day!”

“You don’t have a thousand bags of toffee,” said Jade, trying to smile.

“If we get on that dark ship, and rescue Princess Qirune, she’ll give us all enough toffee to last a dozen lifetimes!” responded Brandon.

“What happens if she doesn’t like toffee, or hasn’t got any?” asked Jade, trying to lighten the mood.

“Who cares,” said Rhea, trying hard not to think any more morbid thoughts about dying. “Let’s shake on Brandon’s bet!”

The three children put their right hands together, just as the ship rocked about again.

“To friends, and Qirune, and whatever is really going on!” stated Rhea.

“Here! Here!” chimed in the other two.

A fairly young man ran up to the Ice Raven’s captain.

“I think we’re gaining on her, sir, but we need more rowers. The men below are starting to tire.”

The captain looked ahead. The Dark Siren was indeed closer than she had been. This was very strange Gellen then considered.

“You know, Ulence, I would have thought that a ship of the IllumiJex might have sailed into thin air by now. You know, disappear by magic,” remarked Gellen.

There had been stories before, of dark ships on the high seas, that were supposed to be able to vanish into thin air at will. Some of Gellen’s own men had sworn they’d seen this sort of thing happen right before their very eyes.

“They must be having some problems with their magic then,” said Ulence, “because we’re definitely gaining on them.”

“All the better for us,” said the captain.

“What about the rowers’ strength though? It cannot last forever,” repeated Ulence.

The captain stared upon the Dark Siren with the kind of cold hard stare that could only come from a deep intense loathing. He hated the dark magic users who’d brought so many years of misery to Cillic. He hated the murderous robbing pirates who made the sea such a dangerous place for honest traders to sail. Most of all, however, Captain Gellen O’Sarke of the Imperial Cillic Navy hated anyone who caused him to break a promise.

Before he and Qirune had left Cillic on the Ice Raven, Gellen had pledged his word to Qirune's father, King Tolis the Second, that he would bring the young princess back in one piece, safe and sound. Now, for all he knew, she was dead already, and his word and promise were not just broken but smashed to oblivion. Gellen burned with anger, at those who'd dared take the young girl, who was destined to soon be queen.

"The rowers, sir?" asked Ulence a third time.

He was now feeling very uncomfortable. Gellen glanced sharply at him. Ulence was right, however. The rowers could not just keep going. He looked over the ship. There were still many men milling about, sorting out rigging and seeing to other duties. In addition, Gellen noticed the three children, and now Naylen, up at the ship's bow. There was something unusual about those children, but he wasn't sure what it was. However, while thinking about this, and how angry he was, a truly insane thought of pure madness formed itself inside Gellen's mind. He glanced at the children again.

"Get those four over here," declared Gellen at once.

"Yes sir," replied Ulence.

Soon Rhea, Jade, Brandon and Naylen were standing next to the captain.

"I take it you know what's going on?" asked Gellen.

"Yes sir!" answered Brandon.

"I doubt it, laddie, but never mind. Do you know what this is?" asked Gellen, pointing with his left hand.

"It's a ship's wheel," said Jade. "You use it to steer with."

"Very good," smiled the captain.

"But why ask us?" questioned Rhea.

"Because, my girl, you three are going to steer this ship into battle!"

Brandon couldn't believe his ears. Him actually get to command the Ice Raven! Rhea and Jade were equally surprised, but Gellen carried on.

"If we're to catch that ship of dread darkness, then I need every man on this vessel to row his guts out, and that includes the officers, and it includes me! So with us lot under deck making us go forward, I'm going to be relying on you three to steer us straight for the Dark Siren," said Gellen.

Ulence looked shocked. Three children steering a great ship of war like this one! It was ridiculous. But the captain had clearly made up his mind, thus there was no going back now.

"So are you up to the challenge?" he asked.

"Yes sir!" exclaimed Brandon, before the others had a chance to say anything.

"Good. How about you, up for some rowing?" asked Gellen of Naylen.

"Just show me an oar," answered Naylen straight away.

"Come on then Ulence, get all the men below deck!" ordered Gellen.

Ulence ordered some soldiers to round up absolutely everybody on the ship, and have them all sent below. Then he and the captain went down themselves. Soon the oar galley was nearly full to overflowing. Even the cook had been dragged out of the ship's kitchen area, to make him row.

Each side of the oar galley was divided into two sub-decks, where oars-men sat on padded benches, their feet resting on wooden slats set at an angle. One sub-deck was set lower than

the other, so that two banks of oars came out each side of the ship, giving four banks in all. All the men sat with their backs to the direction of travel, as you always do to get maximum speed. Naylen took a position near the front of the ship. He grabbed his oar and began to pull it in rhythm with the other men. The Oar Master sat right at the back of the ship, facing the rowers, and kept beating his drum to keep the rhythm constant.

When the captain came below, he suddenly ordered everyone to stop. They all did, thinking this was strange but also thankful for a rest. The captain looked around at his men.

“Today has been a terrible day for the Island of Cillic,” he announced, “and we have all been made fools of.”

Some of the men murmured their agreement. The three guards who’d been with Qirune, at the rail cart ride, were also at their oars, and no one felt more foolish than they did!

“But our enemies are within our sight,” continued Gellen.

“Death to them all!” shouted one man, halfway along the ship, raising his fist.

“Indeed! And die they will,” said the captain. “But first of all, we must catch them.”

“Just give us the signal capt’in, and we’ll chase ‘em to the very gates of Hades!” shouted another man.

Others murmured their agreement. The captain lifted his hand to calm the rowers down.

“I have given our young friends, up on deck, the task of steering the ship. Something tells me they will do us proud, and I’m sure they are equal to the task,” said the captain, looking at Naylen, who nodded his agreement. “Therefore, it is up to us to do the rowing. We are the lifeblood of the Ice Raven. So...”

The captain paused and looked around again. Every man had his eye fixed on him.

“Death to the Dark Siren!” roared the captain.

All the men cheered.

“Victory to the Ice Raven!” roared the captain again.

The men cheered even louder.

“And long life to Her Royal Highness the Princess Qirune!” the captain finished.

“To Qirune! To Princess Qirune!” roared the men, at the tops of their voices!

Naylen looked around. This was absolutely fantastic! To go to war with such a fine crowd of good soldiers. Today was going to be a magnificent day of battle, he could tell. The captain took an oar at the front of one of the rowing banks, near the back of the ship.

“Very well! Oar Master, set battle speed!” ordered Gellen.

The drum started up. Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! A faster rhythm than had been played previously. The men grabbed their oars and began to row like never before. Soon all four of the long banks of oars were moving back and forth as one. They swished into the water, got pulled back, came out dripping, and were pushed forward once more. Over and over and over again. New life was now pulsing through the Ice Raven, and the ship began picking up speed.

- Chapter 24 - Waves of Plants

The lush ferns towered above the young well dressed girl, their uppermost leaves fanning out to form a vast fluttering canopy. Through it, an eerie emerald light filtered from above, but its source was hard to make out. The green roof moved and swayed in rhythm with a cool breeze that caused everywhere to possess the rich smell of fern.

At first, the well-dressed girl seemed frozen in time, almost as if she wasn't sure if she were still alive or now dead. Soon, however, she knew perfectly well that she wasn't dead. The swaying canopy and emerald light started to make her feel quite queasy. Looking down, her thoughts began to return. Clarne Blenquin. That's who I am.

Next, she noticed she was positioned on a narrow grassy path. The ground led up in one direction, while in the other it appeared level, but looked like it might dip down around the first bend.

"Up or down I wonder," said Clarne to herself, almost in a whisper.

She wanted to see above the canopy of giant leaves. That means you should head up, she thought. So off she went. However, walking in solitude through the ferns was an uncanny experience. It was the sense of being totally and utterly and completely alone that gave Clarne the creeps. This has got to be another world she reasoned, and I'm probably the only one here.

The rising path weaved its way around some outcrops of rock, and soon the ferns grew thinner. Moving yet higher,

Clarne started to clamber up a steep rock face. Using both her hands and feet to keep a good balance, she suddenly realised how well she was feeling. There was no sense of weakness in her limbs at all. They felt strong and full of energy. Her long illness obviously didn't affect her in this strange place. It was a welcome feeling, but an eerie one as well.

At the top of the rock face, she was able to stare around in all directions. Endless, endless, endless ferns receded into the far distance like a vast green sea. Here and there, similar outcrops of rock to the one she was on, poked up through the layer of giant leaves. They look a bit like islands or ships, thought Clarne. Far beyond the ferns, in the dim distance, there were shadows of dark rolling hills. Clarne also noticed that the smell of something like heather was filling the air in an almost intoxicating way.

The gentle wind blowing over the ferns made them move in waves and swells, just like a real sea. That's amazing, thought Clarne, just amazing. Overhead, puffy white clouds floated across the patchy blue sky. It was a beautiful scene of pure isolation.

"Congratulations, young lady," said a voice.

Clarne twisted around to glimpse behind her. Nothing. Twisting back she saw an oldish man standing a short distance away, his wooden staff in one hand.

"You what?" she asked hesitantly.

"I said congratulations."

"What for?" she quizzed. "For getting out of the ferns?"

"No, for working out that Valaretta had the ring."

Valaretta? The ring? Of course. The Vaxen house. The picture gallery. The Ring of Goblin Force. In this place of

quietness and isolation, Clarne had clean forgotten about all of that.

“This is not the Vaxen house, is it?” she inquired.

“No, this is the world of Threthonee. It’s an immense distance away, but I thought you might like the sea of ferns.”

Clarne nodded. She had no idea that plants could make waves just like a liquid sea could.

“But you’re still in the Vaxen house too, under a table in fact.”

Clarne remembered nothing about being under a table, only of being queerly lost in a picture of Valaretta Vaxen. Not that it mattered in this place, she thought. But what did matter was her health.

“I feel so well here. So alive! Normally I’m always tired. Is it the air in this place?” asked Clarne, with real interest.

“No,” said the old man. “It’s the empire I’m building. It’s strong on Threthonee.”

“But no one lives here,” responded Clarne. “I can sense that I’m totally alone. How can you have an empire with no people?”

“Possibly that’s one reason why it’s so strong here,” smiled the old man. “There’s no one to oppose it.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Clarne.

“Empires don’t have to rule just over people you know,” stated the old man. “Here everything is peaceful because of my empire. There’s been no war for ages. The ferns certainly don’t spend their time fighting each other.”

Clarne considered that for a moment. Maybe the old man had a point. Despite its strangeness, this was a truly lovely place.

“I wish I was well in my world,” said Clarne, with a hint of sadness. “I’m only here because I fainted. I’d give anything to be stronger.”

“You’ll get well in time.”

“How do you know?” asked Clarne a little sharply. “No one else thinks I ever will.”

“I just happen to know.”

The well-dressed girl didn’t know how to respond to that. A large wave now moved through the ferns in front of Clarne, causing them to bend one way and then the other.

“Would you like a surprise gift?” asked the old man next.

“What kind of gift?” asked Clarne, still watching the fern wave move into the distance.

“Like I said, a surprise one, but also a very useful one.”

Clarne became suspicious.

“I’m not supposed to take things from strangers. They tell us that at RiftWood.”

“Very good advice too,” said the old man. “But it doesn’t really apply here, does it? So why not hold out your hand?”

Clarne hesitated but then did as the old man suggested. What did she have to lose? She was starting to think that none of this was real anyway, so why worry? Opening her left hand she held it out. Moments later, Clarne watched in amazement as a blob of heavy grey liquid grew steadily in her palm, apparently coming from nowhere.

“What is it?” she asked in wonder.

“Mercury,” said the old man, smiling.

“What!” shouted Clarne. “Mercury’s poisonous! You evil man!”

In shock, she threw up her hand and watched the blob of mercury fly out and rise into the air. Next, however, a very uncanny thing happened. Somehow time seemed to slow down all around Clarne. The nearby ferns that had been blowing about quite rapidly in the breeze, now started to rock back and forth like the slow pendulum of a big tall time-marking device, while the green fern sea appeared almost frozen. A blue and grey butterfly, that had settled on Clarne's shoulder bag just a moment before, now flapped slowly across her field of view, its wings beating back and forth in a slow steady rhythm as it flew gradually and gracefully away.

Clarne's eyes switched from the butterfly to the mercury blob. She watched it rise slowly into the air, its glittering form shining in the bright sunlight, as its globulous shape slowly changed with time. Soon it stopped rising and stood fixed in mid-air for what seemed like ages before gravity caused it to finally begin falling. As it fell, the mercury changed shape more dramatically. The blob first became elongated and then adopted a solid form. As it fell faster and faster toward the ground, Clarne's hand slowly swept out toward the tumbling object, which still glinted with a metallic lustre in the sunlight. Her fingers made contact with the thing and closed over it tightly, just as time reverted to normal speed.

Clarne looked at the old man, who looked back at her. Somehow the girl knew that whatever she now held, enclosed in her left hand, was an object of truly astonishing power. Something that was way beyond what charms or magic could ever hope to produce.

"What have you got?" asked the old man.

Clarne's fingers stayed tightly clenched. The object within them remaining solid. It certainly wasn't liquid anymore.

"I don't know why I grabbed it," she said, staring at her closed left hand.

"You grabbed it because you wanted it," answered the old man. "It's something that you've always wanted."

"But I don't know what it is."

"Well have a look."

The young girl glanced at the old man.

"I'm scared to. I can feel its power tingling in my hand."

"It won't hurt you. I promise."

With some effort, Clarne managed to persuade her fingers to open up. In the centre of her palm lay a small, brightly polished, metal key. A tinge of disappointment swept over the girl.

"It doesn't look like much. It's just a little key."

"I thought you liked keys?"

"I do. I love them. But this one doesn't look like anything special."

"Just a little key you say," said the old man in amazement. "My dear girl, there are people who would sell whole kingdoms, and more, to gain such a treasure."

"Why? Is it a skeleton key, that can open lots of different locks?" asked Clarne, her interest growing.

"No," said the old man. "It's a mercury key."

"A what?" asked Clarne in bewilderment.

"A solid key made of liquid mercury. Put it in any lock, and the key turns to liquid, fits itself exactly to the lock mechanism, and then lets you open it up. Simple."

“So it’s magical!” gasped Clarne, who had always, always wanted to own a real magic key.

“No. It’s not magical. It’s more than that,” said the old man, shaking his finger.

“What then?”

“It draws its power directly from me. My presence travels with that little key. Where the key is, then so am I, and so is my will to force open any lock.”

Clarne wasn’t quite sure she understood all that, but it sounded impressive.

“Will it open anything?”

“Anything. Any lock, any combination lock, even locks that are magically sealed. That little key will get you past any door, or into any box. I thought it a fitting gift for a true lover of keys,” said the old man kindly.

“How did you know I liked keys?”

The old man just smiled at Clarne.

“Thank you anyway,” said the girl.

“You’re welcome.”

Clarne thought for a moment. This was silly.

“None of this is real, is it?” she stated to the old man. “I mean, this whole world is just a fainting dream of some sort, and so when I recover and wake up, I won’t have this key or anything else for that matter.”

“You’ll see.”

Slowly, the ferns began to vanish around the edge of Clarne’s vision.

“Hang on!” cried out the well-dressed girl.

The world of Threthonee, which had grown strangely dim, gradually began to brighten again. All the ferns came back into view.

“What is it now?” asked the old man.

“The ring!” stated Clarne. “What about the Ring of Goblin Force?”

“What about it?” asked the old man.

Clarne suddenly felt very confused. She was certain the old man had enabled her to realise what Valaretta held in her left hand, back in the portrait within the Vaxen house. He’d even congratulated her on realising this at the start of their conversation. Why did he seem so unconcerned about the ring now?

“How does it fit into everything?” asked Clarne, intrigued. “I now know Valaretta had it, just over a hundred years ago. I reckon you told me that. What happened afterwards?”

The old man paused for a while. This Clarne was a nice girl. He didn’t want her getting even more ill than she had been already.

“Do you know the story of Valaretta Rudine Vaxen?” he asked.

Clarne nodded. She was beginning to understand Rudine’s story. A happy girl who became very miserable for some reason.

“Well, allow me to tell you, young lady, that you do not know the story of Valaretta Rudine Vaxen, and neither do you wish to know,” said the old man slowly, in a low measured tone. “It’s a shocking tale, and one that is far from over.”

Clarne swallowed nervously. She was suddenly feeling very afraid. The old man continued.

“You and your friends have generally had fun on this little adventure so far, but I’d advise you to leave the ring alone if I were you. Men and goblin rings don’t mix.”

Now Clarne felt very awkward. She didn’t like being lectured to, even by strange beings who knew more than she did.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “I didn’t know.”

“I suppose not,” said the old man.

The breeze picked up now, and grey clouds began to roll across the patchy blue sky.

“You should go,” suggested the old man. “This day is far from over.”

At the mention of the words ‘this day’, Clarne suddenly wanted to ask if she would ever see her friend Rhea again, but she was somehow afraid of the answer. The old man looked straight into Clarne’s dark hazel eyes.

“The answer’s in your hand,” he said.

Impulsively, Clarne’s left hand tightened fiercely around the small metal key that was now hers. She wanted to ask more, but again the ferns began to disappear. This time for good.

In the dull light under a table, Clarne came to. Gosh did her head spin! Random thoughts of rings, fern-covered empires and metal keys filled her confused mind. Illmith helped Clarne to her feet and sat the dazed girl on a padded bench under another painting. Clarne bent over with her head almost between her knees, her eyes tightly shut, trying to recover from the fainting spell. You should have stayed at RiftWood, she told herself. Anyone could walk in here and see you, she thought sadly. A useless adventurer you’ll make. You’re supposed to be

sneaking around this house unnoticed, like an invisible shadow, not sitting about in broad daylight barely able to stand!

Glancing up and across at the portrait of Valaretta Rudine Vaxen, Clarne felt strangely afraid. The ring hidden in Valaretta’s hand now seemed to inspire nothing but fear. Clarne then looked across at Illmith and shook her head sadly. Poor Illmith. She didn’t believe in any of the old legends, but they all seemed to be about her people, the goblin race. What would she think if she knew that the Ring of Goblin Force not only existed but had been right here, in this very house, just over a hundred years ago? Explode with rage probably, thought Clarne. Better keep quiet, for the time being.

“I need fresh air,” said Clarne eventually.

Menonn agreed. It was time to leave this gallery. But now Clarne was wondering why her left hand was so tightly clenched. There was nothing in it, but her fingers seemed to have a mind of their own and kept tightening into a fist. At first, Clarne wondered if it had something to do with Valaretta’s closed hands, but that didn’t feel right. Looking about, she noticed the table Illmith had pulled her under. She stood up in order to move toward it, but her head went suddenly dizzy. Clarne sat back down at once, now almost in tears. This illness was so frustrating.

“What wrong?” asked Illmith, seeing Clarne was upset.

“Everything,” said Clarne sadly.

Menonn knew, from past experience, that the best thing was to just let Clarne sort herself out, after a fainting spell, rather than interfere. He wandered back up to the picture of Valaretta. Such a happy girl. I wonder what really happened to

her? Glancing down, he noticed a small shiny metal object, lying on the wooden floor. That wasn't there earlier, he thought. Menonn poked it with his cane, and then knocked it across the room. It ended up near Illmith. She bent down and picked it up. It was just a little key. Probably something Clarne dropped when she fainted, Illmith thought.

"Key fall out of pocket," said Illmith, holding the small shiny object out to Clarne.

Clarne watched as the fingers of her left hand somehow opened all by themselves. Illmith dropped the key into Clarne's palm, and her fingers snapped shut in an instant, just like a trap. The confusion and muddle in the sick girl's mind now began to clear. There had been something about a key in the fainting dream. It was definitely important. But now her left hand felt normal, her fingers doing exactly what she wanted them to do.

"Didn't Rhea mention a dream about an empire this morning?" asked Clarne.

"Dream of empire and ginger buns!" said Illmith, smiling.

"And the ginger buns turned up, didn't they," said Clarne.

"That was just coincidence," responded Menonn. "It sometimes happens."

"But I just had a dream about an empire and a key, when I fainted," said Clarne slowly, "and now this key has just turned up, out of nowhere."

Menonn and Illmith stared at her.

"Are you trying to spook us?" asked Menonn. "Because we really don't need it. This place is scary enough as it is."

Clarne glanced around the huge picture gallery one more time. Menonn was right. The whole of the Vaxen house was

now giving her the creeps. Glancing at the key, she thought of her friend Rhea and wondered once more if she would ever see her again.

"Let's go," said Clarne. "I think we've got what we came for."

"But we haven't got anything," said Menonn.

"I have," said Clarne. "I've probably got too much."

The faint sound of a bell ringing filled the air. Menonn, Clarne and Illmith looked at each other in horror. But this time, the three friends slipped out of the gallery, and disappeared like invisible shadows, behind doors, tables and other items of furniture. This is more like it, thought Clarne, now feeling much better. They then moved, with great stealth and cunning, all the way down the stairs, all the way out of the house, all around the side, and then deep into the extensive Vaxen gardens. No one ever saw, ever heard, or even suspected that there might be three children on the loose. And that despite the fact one was ill, one had to walk with a cane, and the third was pale blue! Standing behind a small tool shed, the three young adventurers stopped to consider their next move.

"That's the start of the Vaxen labyrinth I reckon," whispered Menonn, pointing at a narrow entrance between two high hedgerows. "It looks massive!"

"If we go in there, we get lost many days," hissed Illmith.

"But the labyrinth is part of the goblin riddle that Jade found. We have to explore it," responded Menonn.

"Rather you than me," said Clarne.

Suddenly some young children came running out of nowhere. They must have been five or six years old. Two boys and a girl.

“Come on! Come on! Let’s play in the maze! In the maze!” two of them squealed, as very young children often do. “We can pretend to be pirates!”

“Wait for me!” cried one of the boys, who’d stopped briefly to tie up his shoelaces. “I want to play pirates too!”

Clarne recognised the black and red uniforms the small children were wearing. Obviously, the youngsters were part of the same choir the three adventurers had seen entering the Vaxen house, earlier that day. But the strange thing was, rather than run into the hedgerows where the huge Vaxen maze clearly started, the three choir children scampered right past, and headed into a clump of trees. The three friends behind the tool shed looked at each other most puzzled.

“What was that all about?” asked Menonn.

“No idea, but let’s follow them,” suggested Clarne.

So sneaking out into the open again, three older children went hunting for three younger children, amongst the nearby trees. But the youngsters had vanished.

“This most strange,” said Illmith, looking about.

“You said it,” said Menonn, also confused.

Wandering beyond the trees into an enclosed green, Clarne could faintly hear the young children again. But there was no one in sight. Suddenly a head popped out of the ground.

“Come on! We should get back before someone sees us!” said one of the young boys, climbing out of a hole set in the grass.

The other two youngsters soon followed, and all three ran straight past Clarne, who looked at them in surprise. But seeing her, they only ran away faster! They ran faster still, once they saw Menonn and Illmith in the trees.

Soon all was quiet. Illmith, Menonn and Clarne stood around a brick-lined square hole in the ground. A strong and eerie sense of darkness and foreboding emanated from the opening.

“Go down there?” said Menonn, looking very unconvinced.

“Absolutely,” said Clarne.

Illmith was already climbing down into the blackness.

- Chapter 25 -
Mad Wars and Red Ravens

Up on the deck of the Ice Raven, Brandon took a firm grip of the ship's wheel. It was a simple job really to steer the great vessel. To go one way, you just turned the wheel in the opposite direction. However, Brandon had never felt more proud in all his life. Fancy it, him steering what must be one of the finest battleships anywhere on the high seas of Mi-Rethyn! Many men dreamt all their lives to do what he was doing right now. Rhea and Jade stood to one side, giving Brandon instructions on what to do since they had a clear line of sight, which Brandon, standing behind the wheel and its wooden guard, did not.

Jade could see that the oars had picked up speed. The Ice Raven was moving visibly faster now, its sharp bow cutting through the water like a huge axe head being driven forward by some unstoppable force. Unlike on certain warships, the battering ram on this one was positioned just above the water line, rather than along it, so it couldn't slow the ship down. The gap between the Ice Raven and the Dark Siren was starting to narrow.

"Go slightly left, Brandon!" shouted Rhea. "I think the ship ahead is trying to dodge us!"

Go left. That means turn right, thought Brandon. He pulled the right-hand side of the great wheel down. The ship began to change course.

"That's enough! Level us out!" shouted Rhea again.

Brandon spun the wheel the other way, back to its neutral position. The Dark Siren continued on a straight course, but then suddenly pulled hard to starboard.

"Go right! Turn us right!" screamed Rhea, at the top of her voice. "They're dodging us!"

Brandon pulled the wheel as far as he could to the left. With the Ice Raven travelling at this speed, the ship's rudder struggled against him. It was like trying to hold down a wild tiger with your bare hands! Brandon was practically hanging off the wheel by now, to keep the ship turning in the direction he wanted.

"Quick, tell the right-hand oars to stop!" Rhea shouted to Jade.

The small girl ran off down the stairs and yelled instructions at the Oar Master, as she'd been told to do.

"Right oars cease!" shouted the Oar Master.

The men on the starboard side of the ship stopped rowing and gasped for breath. But there were still a few spare oars on the other side. Naylen switched across and grabbed one on the port side of the vessel, as did some of the other men. Soon every port oar was in motion. Jade ran back up onto the main deck, in case things had changed.

"I could really do with some help!" shouted Brandon to Rhea.

Rhea ran across, and the two of them now pulled with all their might to keep the wheel to the left. It was like struggling with a great mad dragon!

"This is impossible!" gasped Rhea, gritting her teeth.

"Just keep going right!" shouted Jade. "They're still trying to out-turn us!"

The wheel creaked with the strain. However, the Ice Raven's greater speed meant it couldn't turn as tightly as the Dark Siren had. In their craftiness, the pirates had slowed right down and managed to rotate through a complete right angle compared to the Ice Raven.

"Oh no! We're going to overshoot them!" exclaimed Jade.

The Ice Raven passed within a ship's length of the stern of the Dark Siren. Brandon, Jade, and Rhea could see cloaked figures on its aft deck, waving weapons and jeering at them. The sight sent a chill down their spines. To the children, they may as well have been looking across at orcs or eeriths, fresh from the tar pits of Krullen! Suddenly a hail of burning arrows came flying toward the three friends, zipping down near their position. In no time they all dived for cover behind the wheel. So that's why there's a thick wooden guard around it, Brandon thought, in case this sort of thing happens! Rhea then wondered if the young man who'd threatened her by the rail cart ride might be on the ship they were now chasing.

"Oh heck!" said Jade. "We are in trouble!"

The Ice Raven was slowing down now, and with just one side still rowing, the ship was turning more tightly. The Dark Siren meanwhile had picked up speed and was moving away once again in a straight line. They all got up. Jade bravely moved back out into the open.

"Level us out!" she shouted. "Level us out!"

Brandon and Rhea spun the wheel the other way, to the right.

"We're still going the wrong way! You're steering all wrong!" screamed Jade.

"No we're not!" shouted Rhea back. "It's you! You haven't told the starboard side lot to start rowing again, you blockhead!"

Jade bit her lip and belted down the steps, shouting new orders at the Oar Master.

"Starboard oars! Resuming rowing!" ordered the Oar Master in his loud voice.

The men on the starboard side started up again. Naylen, and the others who'd switched sides before, all moved back, so there were equal numbers of active oars on both sides of the ship. Once more, the rowers picked up the beat of the Oar Master's drum and the Ice Raven gathered speed. Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

"Sorry," said Jade, when she came back on deck.

"Well let's not let that pirate ship fool us again," replied Brandon.

Rhea let go of the wheel now, grabbed a damp cloth, and beat out some of the flames from the burning arrows. Then she looked across the water at the other ship. How can we trick them, she wondered. The Ice Raven was clearly the faster ship on the level, but turning at speed wasn't easy. The Dark Siren didn't need to worry about catching them, so it would always have the advantage in this deadly game of cat and mouse, on the high seas.

"We're gaining on them!" shouted Jade excitedly.

"Yes, but they'll turn again and we'll probably end up overshooting like the last time," replied Brandon, keeping the ship's wheel dead level.

Brandon was right, thought Rhea. What could they do? She looked around in despair but happened to notice her shoulder

bag, lying on the deck nearby, where she'd thrown it some time ago. All of a sudden, the bag seemed to come into sharp focus within her vision. Going over, Rhea bent down, opened it up, and pulled out of its dark interior the ornate solid gold headband that was princess Qirune's. Of course! Naylen had given it to her, to look after, as they jumped into the chariots by the rail cart ride, to race down to the quayside. Standing up, she held the thing to her eyes. The Red Raven at its centre glinted beautifully in the clear bright sunlight, its colour as deep as the purest blood.

"What are you looking at that for?" cried out Brandon. "We're supposed to be at war!"

"I'm thinking," said Rhea quietly.

A strange time to be thinking, thought Brandon. The Ice Raven was gaining heavily on the Dark Siren now, but the evil ship still hadn't changed course. Studying the headband, Rhea noticed that Qirune's Red Raven was facing to the right. This was just as it would have looked to Rhea, if Qirune were standing in front of her right now, and wearing the golden ornament upon her head. Now that Rhea came to think of it, she'd only ever seen it this way. However, thought Rhea carefully, if I turn the headband round as if I were to put it on, as Qirune herself would do, then to me the Raven now faces to the left and not the right. How interesting. So everyone you ask thinks the Red Raven points to the right, and they would be correct, but for Qirune, and Qirune alone, the Red Raven always points left.

Looking ahead at the pirate ship, Rhea suddenly realised, with gut-wrenching certainty, that the Dark Siren with Qirune on board was going to turn left, any moment now. And once

again, Rhea sensed that some strange power, beyond that of raw magic, had worked its eerie way, and let her in on a secret that no spell could have discovered.

"Quick!" she shouted to Brandon. "Turn the ship left! Now!"

"Has the other ship moved then?" he asked back.

"It doesn't matter! Just do it!" screamed Rhea straight at him.

Brandon, seeing Rhea was deadly serious, spun the wheel to the right.

"Jade!" shouted Rhea.

"Yes!" she said, spinning herself around.

"Go down and tell the Oar Master to up the pace," said Rhea. "Tell them to set for ramming speed!"

Jade didn't understand what was going on, but she didn't doubt Rhea for a moment and belted down the steps to shout the new order.

"Are you sure?" asked the Oar Master in return.

"It's now or never!" shouted Jade. "We're lining up to hit them!"

"Very well. Men of the Ice Raven..." roared the Oar Master, "...set for ramming speed!"

The rhythm of the drum suddenly stepped up, and the oarsmen now rowed as if all the monsters of Hell, Hades and Krullen combined were roaring and screeching behind them! The Ice Raven picked up even more speed and began to veer to the left, just as the Dark Siren did the same. With a sly smile, Rhea realised the pirates would have noticed the Ice Raven had turned the same way they did, and that it was all too late for them now. Like before, the Dark Siren had slowed down to make this second tight turn, but this time the Ice Raven was

going straight for her, instead of overshooting as she'd done before. As the men below gave their all, the Ice Raven's bow was now slicing through the water at near-record speed, and all the while, its terrible bronze battering ram glittered beautifully in the bright midday sun.

"Keep it left! Keep it left!" screamed Jade, eyes locked on the dark ship ahead, where pirates were now starting to run about like headless chickens.

Brandon and Rhea pulled the wheel to the right for all their lives. The steering was much harder since both sides of oars were still going flat out, but Brandon gave it his all. Groaning with the effort, between them they just about kept the Ice Raven on course. The Dark Siren was looming large in their sights now. The ship tried in vain to spin around to the right but it just wasn't going to be enough. Jade suddenly ran down the steps to the Oar Master.

"We're going to hit! We're going to hit!" she shouted, jumping up and down with excitement.

The Ice Raven's oar-men gave it one last extreme push. Rhea and Brandon, yelling with the effort required, pulled on the right-hand side of the wheel one final time, to keep the great ship veering left. The men gasped with effort, the oars ploughed through the water, and the ship's wheel creaked and creaked, but finally, the bronze battering ram found its target and smashed into the back of the Dark Siren's starboard hull side.

Planks of wood and broken oars spayed up in all directions! With the Ice Raven's speed at an all-time high, the terrible ram pushed the Dark Siren around and continued to rip through the ship's hull with the most horrendous cracking noise. Soon the

Ice Raven itself jolted as its bow smashed into the enemy ship, ripped up through the Dark Siren's port side, and began tearing its way along the deck. Eventually, both ships ground to a standstill, but the battle had only just started!

There was no time to lose. Hatches were thrown open all the way along the Ice Raven's deck and men poured out like ants, swords in hand, screaming and yelling and howling as they ran toward the bow where the Dark Siren was. At the same time, pirates started pouring over from their stricken ship onto the Ice Raven's main deck. Soon, from the aft deck where the children were, the scene resembled two armies of ferocious ants that just tore into each other. In no time at all, a battle was raging over the whole bow and starboard decks of both ships. It was impossible to tell who was winning. Swords and shields glinted and flashed in the sun, and the yelling and screaming just got louder and louder and louder.

This is just dreadful, thought Jade, looking away. She'd had enough. Rhea and Brandon however wanted to see if anyone was coming their way, so they could run to avoid them.

"You know what?" said Rhea suddenly.

"What?" asked Brandon.

"I've just realised," continued Rhea. "We could well have killed Qirune ourselves in that awful smash-up!"

"Crumbs! I hadn't thought of that!" exclaimed Brandon. "Oh heck! I hope she's all right!"

Naylen Shaw was swinging his silver-white metal sword at anyone and anything that got in his way. He and Gellen and Ulence fought like a pack of three deranged wolves, gone totally out of their minds! Between them, they had cut down over a

dozen pirates before any of them had even managed to get off the Ice Raven. With this battle raging all around, you had to duck, dodge or jump almost every moment to avoid the sword blades and other weapons trying to kill you.

“Let’s just get on that other ship!” yelled Gellen.

Naylen and Ulence pushed forward through the mass of pirates in front of them. Suddenly they seemed to be on the other side of that violent crowd and stepped easily onto the Dark Siren.

“Naylen, you go that way, we’ll go this,” shouted Gellen.

Naylen ran off down toward the bow of the Dark Siren, which was starting to fill with water, and would soon sink beneath the sea. Where would Qirune be? Gellen and Ulence headed toward the stern, thinking that Qirune might be somewhere in the captain’s cabin. They had to cut and fight their way through to that section of the ship, but when they got there, most of it was in ruins. The aft deck had already collapsed where the Ice Raven’s ram had ripped out all the structural woodwork beneath it.

“What a mess!” said Ulence, staring around.

“Where is she!” asked Gellen in dismay.

Naylen had now climbed down into the Dark Siren’s oar galley. Water was pouring in through the hole at the back, and you could clearly see the battering ram and lower hull of the Ice Raven embedded in the dark ship. But where was the princess? Deciding there was nothing down here, Naylen ran back up on deck. By now, other members of the Ice Raven’s crew had managed to get onto the Dark Siren. They were also rushing about looking for Qirune.

Naylen stopped to think for a moment. Come on, where would you put something you didn’t want other people to find? Where on a pirate ship do you store things you want to keep hidden? Naylen looked around earnestly, trying hard to concentrate, but soon there was far too much going on for anybody to think very clearly about anything.

A deep low cracking sound suddenly filled the sea air. The deck of the Dark Siren split open right down the middle, as the ship began to break up under the strain of the Ice Raven’s attack. While this happened, the stern also decided to finally break off at the same moment. And then to cap it all, the two main masts suddenly creaked ominously, and with almost no warning, tonnes and tonnes of sails and rigging and crossbeams and rope came crashing down onto the deck, most of it smashing right through into the oar galley below. Everybody just dived for cover! But even when it seemed safe to risk coming out again, the main masts then finally gave up. One fell back, and like a great tree that had just been cut down, it smashed and splintered over the rear of the ship, where the stern had once been. The other ripped itself out of the front deck and fell sideways, crashing over the port side and straight into the sea. Everybody just dived for cover again!

Hiding behind a load of wooden boxes, Gellen was growing desperate. This whole ship was going to sink in no time at all and there was still no sign of Qirune. What in the world were they supposed to do?

“The deck’s flooding, captain sir,” said Ulence. “Shouldn’t we think about moving?”

“What! And leave Her Royal Highness to drown on this doomed ship. I think not!” replied Gellen angrily.

Ulence sighed. The stern section was almost completely underwater by now, and everybody who could still move was heading straight for the Ice Raven.

Back on the deck of the Cillic ship, the battle was raging on as never before, and it was all starting to get more than a little bit dangerous! Swords and daggers and maces and hammers were all out in abundance, as men up and down the ship desperately tried to whack and bash and hit and smash each other, in any way they could. Some had lost their weapons in the fierce fighting and were now hitting each other with planks of wood and bits of thick rope. One of the bigger Cillic soldiers had even taken to just thumping the enemy pirates with his bare fists, and seemed to be doing rather well! Jade, Brandon, and Rhea had moved to the very back of the Ice Raven, in an effort to avoid the fighting. However, some pirates came looking for them, but they ran into a couple of Cillic soldiers called Drenas and Torenn instead.

“Aren’t they the two we met earlier on?” said Jade to Brandon.

“Looks like they could be,” said Brandon. “I hope they’re good fighters!”

They were, and the pirates were soon finished off in no time at all. Torenn gazed at the three children.

“Look here Drenas, it’s those idiots we met this morning!”

“Oh yes! I see you’ve decided to come out on a fishing trip with us after all,” said Drenas laughing. “Trouble is, we have a habit of catching pirates rather than crabs!”

Both men laughed out loud, but moments later they were once again fighting for their lives against more of the pirate

enemy. Jade and Brandon looked at each other embarrassed. Rhea just looked puzzled.

“What was that about?” she asked incredulously.

“We’ll tell you later,” said Brandon. “Come on! Let’s move away from here.”

The three friends crept around the back of the ship, to the port side, and looked across at the sinking Dark Siren. It was now little more than a pile of floating scrap wood. Hull planking, wooden boxes, and various barrels were bobbing about in the water around the stricken ship.

“I wonder if that’s a treasure chest over there,” said Jade, pointing at a large wooden box in the water.

“If it was full of treasure, it would sink like a stone,” said Rhea quickly.

“Well, why don’t we go and have a look,” suggested Brandon. “We are treasure hunters you know, and there’s never a better place to look for treasure than on a pirate ship!”

However, Rhea was starting to think about other things. She looked despairingly at the sinking wreck.

“You know, I don’t think they’ve found Qirune,” she said slowly.

The other two went quiet. All thoughts of treasure left their minds. In all the excitement of the battle, they’d almost clean forgotten about why they were here in the first place. Jade looked across sadly at the Dark Siren. She had never met or even seen, this princess, who they’d just risked their lives trying to save. And now it looked like she never would.

- Chapter 26 - A Hideous Barrier

Illmith, Menonn and Clarne trudged through the dark tunnels under the Vaxen family house. The network of passages was enormous. There must be hundreds of rooms down here, thought Menonn. Digging this lot out must have taken years and years.

“Do we know why we are here?” asked Menonn, whose crippled leg was now aching quite badly and so wanted to stop for a rest.

“No,” hissed Illmith, “but there something important in maze.”

“Let’s stop anyway,” said Clarne. “I fancy a drink. The air here is so stale.”

The three friends sat on the ground and put their burning torches, which they’d found unlit earlier, up against the tunnel wall. Clarne handed round a flask of water. Everybody had a gulp.

“What a great trip this is,” moaned Menonn. “Hunting round a dusty labyrinth of dark tunnels. I think the others got the better choice of it, tripping off to the fairground!”

“We’ve done very well to get this far,” said Clarne.

“Only because we saw those children playing, or we’d never of found this place,” stated Menonn.

“Let’s carry on,” said Illmith.

The three children got up and continued to creep deeper and deeper into the labyrinth.

“Look! On top of that door frame, it says ‘Map Room’. This must be worth looking at,” suggested Menonn.

An immense and nearly black metal door, wider than a person with arms outstretched and taller than a giant, stood in their way. Large swirling runes were woven intricately into the dark metal surface. A strong feeling of being next to an impenetrable barrier emanated from the deep grey metal.

“There must be enough magic in that thing to stop all the world from being able to enter,” suggested Menonn.

Illmith gazed at the door and reached out her blue hand to touch its metal surface.

“It feel strong. Very strong,” she said. “We not ever get in unless we have magic key.”

Menonn looked at Clarne.

“You’re the key freak. I don’t suppose you brought a magic skeleton key with you by any chance?”

Clarne was about to say something nasty in reply but suddenly remembered the key Illmith had given her in the picture gallery.

“I wonder if we’ll get in with this,” said Clarne, producing the little key from her hip pocket.

“Get in with that?” cried out Menonn. “I don’t think so!”

The key did look insignificant against the might of the door, thought Clarne.

“Anyway, even if you did have an all-powerful skeleton key that came straight out of a dream, it wouldn’t work on this door,” said Menonn matter-of-factly. “It has no lock.”

Menonn was right there. Nowhere on the door was there either a lock or a handle.

“It must go up and down like spiked castle gate,” suggested Illmith.

“You mean like a portcullis, operated by a rope winch,” corrected Menonn.

“That what you call it?” said Illmith. “A port-cul-lus? Goblin people just say spiked gate.”

Clarne held the little key in her hand. A memory of it being very important flickered through her head.

“How can it open this?” she said to herself, glancing at the huge door.

Fear crept into the girl. Clarne guessed that the greatest warlocks of the IllumiJex had cast powerful spells and great incantations upon this door, to keep whatever was inside hidden from the rest of the world. She also reckoned that all this spell-casting had probably occurred about a hundred years ago, much the same time as when Valaretta Rudine Vaxen had lived in the great house they’d just visited.

The rune riddle went through Clarne’s mind. ‘Beware Vaxen Labyrinth, Beware IllumiJex Blackness, past lie Secrets beyond all Darkness, Power beyond all Magic’. But what is past what? And how do we get beyond the darkness and magic of this door? All they had was a funny little key, but no lock to use it on, and no keyhole to put it in.

“Maybe the lock is invisible, and will appear by magic if you push the key against the door,” said Menonn, trying to be funny.

“You’re getting as bad as Brandon,” responded Clarne.

But maybe it was worth a try. She pushed the key against the centre of the rune system. Suddenly the scene from her

fainting dream where the key had, for a moment, hung still in mid-air, flashed into Clarne’s mind. Nothing else happened.

“It not work, just like rest of empire you dream about,” said Illmith in a cold tone.

She hated even the word ‘empire’. Clarne ignored her and continued to hold the picture of the airborne key firmly in her head.

“Can’t see anything happening,” said Menonn.

“Just shut up you two!” scolded Clarne, who was desperately trying to concentrate.

Illmith and Menonn sensed she was serious and kept silent. With her eyes closed, Clarne pulled the picture of the key into her mind as firmly as she could.

“Look!” said Illmith in shock.

The tip of the key touching the door turned to mercury and started to flow slowly outward along the runes woven into its surface. Further and further spread the liquid metal, creeping along the curving patterns like some living creature. Soon the whole rune system embossed into the door was filled with shimmering mercury.

“Just look at that!” exclaimed Menonn. “The key’s fitting itself to the runes. They must be the lock!”

Illmith’s cat-like eyes opened wide in amazement. She’d never seen anything associated with the blue star empire ever do anything, but here before her very eyes, something incredible was happening. Clarne also opened her eyes. The glistening silver pattern made by the mercury was beautiful. It picked out the swirling designs of the runes to exact perfection.

“What’s happening now?” asked Menonn.

“I think the key is battling against the IllumiJex magic. That’s my guess anyway,” answered Clarne.

It was a silent battle. There were no strange noises, no flashes of light. But a sudden loud crack made all three of them jump. Next, all the mercury fell off the door, and onto the floor with a splash. As it hit the ground, the liquid metal smashed into thousands of tiny beads that sprayed out in all directions.

“Look out!” exclaimed Clarne. “That stuff’s supposed to be poisonous!”

The children continued to watch the thousands of shiny beads roll across the floor until they came to a standstill. The black door remained as solid as ever.

“Key of empire fail,” said Illmith, who was disappointed but not surprised.

As far as she was concerned, anything to do with the goblin empire of legend was just one big disappointment after another. Clarne felt more than disappointed however, she felt heartbroken.

“My key!” she exclaimed, almost in tears.

Next, she was beating her fists hard on the black metal door.

“How dare you destroy my key!” she screamed. “How dare you!”

“Steady on Clarne!” said Menonn, who’d never before seen the girl lose her temper like this. “You’ve only had it for an afternoon or so.”

“I don’t care, it was my key!” she screamed at Menonn, at the top of her voice. “It was given to me!”

Menonn stepped back in alarm. The girl was wild with rage.

“It was just a key, alright?”

“It was not just a key!” shouted Clarne. “It was the greatest key ever! And now I’ve lost it!”

“Empire play trick again,” said Illmith frowning. “It always the same.”

Clarne closed her eyes. The picture of the key hanging in mid-air still filled her mind. But now it was smashed into ten-thousand pieces. Rage boiled up inside her in no time.

“It’s all your fault!” she shouted at the other two.

“What we done!” exclaimed Illmith.

Clarne didn’t answer. She may have been desperately ill for the last two years, she may never get well or be strong again, and she may have fainted earlier that day, but at that very moment, a supernatural strength poured through her veins. So with lightning speed, her shoulder bag swept around in a great arc and slammed so hard into Illmith’s side, that the goblin girl was knocked clean off her feet, and hit the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Menonn couldn’t believe what was going on. They’d all been best friends a few moments ago. Once over the initial shock, Illmith got up again, and when she did, Menonn could see that her cat-like eyes were ice cold with fury.

“Just stop this Clarne!” shouted Menonn. “Don’t you see what’s happening? Some force or magic is affecting us.”

“Affecting her you mean,” hissed Illmith, who was getting ready to thump Clarne very, very hard.

Clarne now changed her attention from Illmith to Menonn.

“Whose side are you on anyway!” she snarled.

Menonn then held up his cane, gripping it tightly with both hands.

“Well not yours,” he said coldly, getting madder with Clarne with each passing moment.

“You not hit her!” hissed Illmith now at Menonn. “She hit me, so I going hit her back!”

“Oh yeah!” snarled Menonn in an icy tone at Illmith. “Well, I’ll bash whoever the heck I like!”

“And if either of you touch me then you’ll both wish you hadn’t!” growled Clarne, looking back and forth between both Illmith and Menonn, her bag still in her hands.

Menonn then decided that before he’d hit Clarne, he’d first give Illmith a good bash around the head to shut her up. Illmith was just about ready to try and knock Clarne’s head clean off her shoulders with a single swipe, while Clarne planned to lay her bag fully into the face of the first person who came anywhere near her. The three ex-friends then started to creep slowly toward one another, ready to begin a fight to the death, when suddenly the most deafening crack erupted from the black metal door. All three froze like statues. They all looked round, ashen-faced.

The huge metal door started to sink into the ground with a deep grinding noise. The three children stared on as the door top slowly moved lower and lower until it disappeared into the ground completely. Then they all stared at each other in sheer disbelief, as an eerie silence fell over the entire scene.

“Are you two all right?” asked Menonn quietly, as he still held his cane up, ready to bash Illmith.

Their eyes all glanced at one another’s. Illmith nodded. Clarne nodded. Menonn lowered his cane. Illmith staggered to a wooden bench, tucked up against the wall, and sat down

holding her side. Gosh did it hurt. Once there she noticed the little metal key lying at Clarne’s feet, all in one piece.

“There your key,” gasped Illmith, pointing.

“I don’t think I want it anymore,” said Clarne sadly, glaring down at the shiny metal object.

“But it work. It open door and break magic spell over us,” said Illmith, still in pain.

Clarne moved the key away with her foot.

“It almost got us all killed. I’ve suddenly gone off this adventure,” she said.

Menonn gazed through the open door into the vault-like room beyond. What mysteries were waiting inside, he wondered.

“We can’t just give up now,” he said, turning back to face Clarne.

“Yes we can,” she said quietly.

Illmith slowly moved over to Clarne and picked the little key up off the floor. She offered it out to the disheartened girl.

“It yours,” Illmith said.

Clarne shook her head, not wanting to touch it. She felt awful at having hit Illmith so hard. She’d also started feeling weak again. Sit down or you’ll faint once more, she told herself. Soon all three of the friends were sitting on the wooden bench in silence. The passageway into the hidden room remained wide open but no one wanted to move for the time being.

“I’m sorry Illmith,” said Clarne eventually, her head bowed.

She was too ashamed of herself to think about anything else at that moment. Illmith, however, was holding nothing against Clarne. The goblin girl still remembered her first meeting with Clarne Blenquin, back in the Master’s garden at RiftWood, and

how accepting Clarne had been of her. Getting up, Illmith went over to her upset friend and tucked the little key back into Clarne's hip pocket. Menonn decided to try and get things moving again, but it was Illmith who spoke first.

"Magic try kill us, but we still friends," she said, trying to lift the mood.

"That's right," agreed Menonn, "and we're not going to let a little magic stop us from finding what we're looking for, in that room, are we?"

"No," said Illmith, who like Menonn, hadn't the faintest idea as to what they were actually looking for, but didn't care.

Clarne stared at the floor. The words 'we still friends' pulsed through her head. Illmith was right. The magic in the door had failed. Anger rose within her again. But this time she was angry at those of the IllumiJex, who'd enchanted the dark metal door in the first place, with such an evil and hideous spell. They'd hidden something in this room, and by Jove, were the three of them going to find it. Clarne stood up slowly, her face stern.

"Come on then, let's see what they've been trying so hard to keep so secret for so long," she said.

Illmith and Menonn both smiled.

- Chapter 27 -
Small Dogs and Floating Boxes

“We should never have rammed this horrible pirate ship!” exclaimed Captain Gellen to Ulence. “What was I thinking, letting three children steer a great warship into battle! What an absolute shambles this has all turned into!”

Naylen caught up with the two anxious-looking officers.

“I’ve no idea where Qirune is,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Seawater was now lapping around the ankles of the three men.

“If we stay here, we’ll all go down,” said Ulence.

The captain stared at the deck, which was now completely underwater. Ulence was right. Wait any longer and they’d have to swim back to the Ice Raven.

“What a terrible day for Cillic,” said Gellen, almost in tears.

Naylen, Ulence and Gellen then waded over the Dark Siren’s deck for the last time and climbed up the side of the Ice Raven’s hull. The fighting on the Cillic ship was starting to wane now, and it was clear that the Cillic soldiers had won the day, but if Qirune was lost then the whole battle would have been for nothing. The remaining pirates, seeing that their ship was now sinking beneath the waves and that most of their comrades had been killed by Cillic guards, finally decided it was time to just give up. Thus the battle ended swiftly, and the few living pirates left were herded into a corner, with no weapons, and kept under guard.

As the hull of the Dark Siren finally sank beneath the waves, tears fell down Rhea’s cheeks. Qirune had surely

drowned and there was nothing left they could do. Jade, however, noticed a couple of Cillic soldiers holding onto some planks of wood.

“We should go and help them,” she said.

“How could we do that?” asked Rhea, tiredness now showing in her voice.

“We could take a rowing boat,” suggested Brandon. “There are two of them, hanging down on either side of the rear hull.”

Rhea just looked at Brandon in a dejected manner.

“Come on Rhea, let’s try and do something useful,” suggested Brandon.

“Useful? The last time we tried to be useful, we sunk the ship carrying the princess we were trying to rescue, and drowned her,” said Rhea, now almost crying.

Brandon could see that Rhea was in no mood for anything.

“Are you game?” he asked Jade.

Jade looked at Rhea.

“You go if you want, I’ll be fine here,” said Rhea, sitting down, her head resting on her knees.

Hence Brandon and Jade left her, climbed down a rope ladder into one of the small rowing boats, and worked the pulley that lowered it gently into the water. Once the pulley was undone, the boat was free.

“We’ll have to take an oar each,” said Brandon.

“Alright,” said Jade, grabbing one with both hands. “Let’s go!”

The small boat, which as a bit of a joke had been named the Chilly Rook by the Ice Raven crew, moved slowly away from the great warship. It bobbed up and down on the sea waves as small boats do, and rocked all over the place.

“You’ll tip us over if you keep moving about like that!” exclaimed Brandon.

“I can’t help it, I’m not tall enough to row properly!” retorted Jade.

Trying hard to stay upright, Brandon and Jade paddled as best they could toward the two men hanging onto some driftwood.

“We’ve come to rescue you!” shouted Jade, as they got closer.

“Don’t bother with us!” shouted one of the men back. “Go over there!”

The soldier pointed at a wooden packing case. Jade and Brandon glanced across. A small dog was standing on top of the case, looking very unsure of things.

“Poor thing! We have to save it!” exclaimed Jade, who liked all small animals, especially small dogs.

“I didn’t come out here to rescue a silly dog!” shouted out Brandon. “I came to save a royal princess, or at least I thought I did.”

Jade was already rowing toward the wooden box though.

“We’ll come back,” said Brandon to the soldiers. “Once we have the dog, that is!”

The Chilly Rook glided across the water to the floating packing case. Once they were close enough, the small dog jumped eagerly into the rowing boat, barking excitedly and wagging its tail wildly. Jade patted it lovingly on the head and suggested they now leave and get the two soldiers. Brandon agreed and started to paddle them away. But the dog jumped about excitedly, and then rushed to the back of the Chilly Rook, barking loudly out to sea while glancing round at the children.

“What does he want now?” exclaimed Brandon. “We’ve just rescued him! Surely he doesn’t want to go back!”

Jade looked across at the packing case floating in the water. It was no different from the many other bits of floating debris left after the sinking of the Dark Siren. But as the early afternoon sun beat down on the Chilly Rook, Jade could have sworn, for a few moments at least, that the light caused this particular packing case to take on a golden hue.

“I think we should go back,” she told Brandon. “I’m sure there’s something valuable inside.”

Brandon had seen the strange look on Jade’s face and gazed at the packing box himself. But it was just a wooden case. Jade looked at Brandon, who looked at Jade. Surely not!

They rowed back to the case, where Brandon noticed that the lid was not locked. Leaning over, he pulled it up and looked inside. A thin, pale girl with bright green eyes looked back.

“Are you Qirune?” asked Brandon.

The frightened-looking girl nodded.

“Oh! Well! We’ve come all the way out here to rescue you, only it all went a bit wrong!” stated Brandon.

Jade peered over to have a look as well.

“That’s right Your Highness. We didn’t really mean to sink the ship you were travelling on! That was, well, a bit of an accident I suppose,” said Jade, not really knowing how you were meant to address a real live princess.

But at that moment Qirune couldn’t care less about who sank what ship or how anybody addressed her.

“Can we help you out?” asked Brandon.

Qirune nodded. The small dog barked loudly and cheerfully as Brandon and Jade helped the princess out of the packing

case and into their rowing boat. Qirune looked around. She recognised the Ice Raven at once and sighed with relief. She was safe.

“Thank you,” she said to Brandon. “You must be very brave.”

“Oh, it was nothing, Your Royal Highness,” said Brandon, looking in disbelief at the Red Raven marked clearly on the girl’s forehead.

Jade saw then, that the two men previously hanging onto some planks, had been picked up by the other rowing boat. They were cheering and waving at them. Qirune acknowledged back with her hand.

“Let’s row back to the ship,” Brandon suggested to Jade.

The little girl nodded. So the two children paddled the Chilly Rook back toward the Ice Raven. It didn’t take the men on the Cillic ship long to recognise the princess, and within moments they were all roaring and cheering and shouting and jumping up and down with sheer delight, right along the deck of the great battle craft, as the small rowing boat came closer and closer. To Brandon and Jade, it seemed like a scene out of some fantastic story come true! The shouting and cheering got louder and louder as they moved nearer and nearer. Eventually, they reached the pulley, fixed the boat to the ropes, and up it came. All the men were shouting ‘Long live Qirune!’ at the tops of their voices as the Chilly Rook was hauled up on deck. Rhea, who was utterly delighted that Qirune was still alive, cheered as loudly as anyone. Naylen and Gellen roared in victory and slapped each other hard on the back. All thoughts of it being a terrible day were banished now! Even the small dog joined in, barking and yapping and wagging its tail.

Rhea ran to her bag, got out the ornate golden headband that was Qirune’s, and pushed her way gradually to the front of the crowds of jubilant men. She waited until the cheers subsided and then stepped forward.

“This is yours, I believe, Your Royal Highness,” said Rhea shyly, holding out the headband and curtsying.

Qirune took the headband. She glanced at it for a moment, its Red Raven as deep and as brilliant as ever. In moments, it was back on her head, and all the men roared again, and jumped up and down, shouting ‘The Cillic Kingdom! Long Life to the Great Cillic Kingdom!’. Brandon and Jade had never seen such enthusiastic cheering in all their lives. It was just wonderful!

Eventually, though, the cheers died down. Qirune thanked all the men for saving her, while Captain Gellen said, on their behalf, that it had been a glorious day of battle and victory, for both them and their ship.

Soon after, two fast patrol vessels from the WixWyn war fleet came out, to see just what had been going on, in the sea lanes beyond their harbour, throughout the afternoon. Gellen relayed much of the story to their commanders and agreed to hand over the remaining pirates for the WixWyn authorities to deal with. He couldn’t be bothered to look after prisoners right at that moment. Rather, he turned the Cillic battleship once more toward the great White Towers and ordered that it be rowed back to shore.

It was mid to late afternoon by the time the victorious Ice Raven had moored up once again in the WixWyn naval

harbour. Not surprisingly, news of the great battle had spread far and wide, and a large crowd of people gathered to cheer the victors on, for what had been a remarkable feat of bravery and courage on the high seas! Many were fisher folk, naval workers, and merchant traders, who all decided that taking an afternoon off work to thank the ship from Cillic was a great idea. Flags of all kinds and shapes and colours were enthusiastically waved, and a huge shout and cheer went up as the gangplanks fell in place. Soon the Cillic soldiers began to come ashore, amid more cheering.

The Dark Siren had been a hated ship, plundering many a trading and cargo vessel over the last few years, and so no one in the harbour was the least bit upset, that it had sunk to the bottom of the ocean without a trace! Amongst all the crowds and noise and jubilation, Naylen, Rhea, Brandon and Jade walked down the gangplank, back onto dry land.

“What a fantastic day! Wait till the others hear about this!” said Brandon, who was thoroughly enjoying being the centre of all this adulation.

Jade, glancing around at the scene, felt a bit overwhelmed by it all, and stayed close to Rhea and Naylen, who both took it all in their stride. Gellen came up to the group now gathered on the quayside.

“You were magnificent, all of you,” he said, looking at each in turn. “The people of Cillic will write songs about you and sing them to their grandchildren, of that you can be sure!”

Naylen thanked Gellen and told him that he’d never had the privilege of fighting with such fine men and that all of them deserved a medal. The children were about to leave and head

back to Dale Field Academy for the evening, when Gellen stopped them.

“You know you will always be welcome on Cillic, should you ever risk the journey across.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Rhea, who suddenly thought that going to Cillic at some point would be a great idea.

“Also,” continued Gellen, “as a token of our appreciation, we have decided to hold a day of feasting and celebration right here on the quayside tomorrow afternoon. You will, of course, be guests of honour. And bring your friends as well. I’m dying to see more children from this amazing RiftWood School that has produced such extraordinary adventurers.”

“You bet!” exclaimed Brandon. “You can count on us being here! Wouldn’t miss it for the world!”

“We’ll be here,” said Naylen. “Until then, I bid you farewell.”

The two men shook hands, and Naylen and the three children wandered away, to find their way back to the school of Dale Field.

- Chapter 28 -
Spiders, Secrets and Sandwiches

The three young adventurers stepped carefully into the forbidden room. As they held out their torches, they could see it was very large, with giant shelves all around. Several magnificent huge candlesticks were positioned across the floor, four fat candles being fixed upon each one. Clarne had, by now, spent enough time in darkness, so reaching up with her torch she gradually managed to light all the candles in the room. Their small flames were sufficient to see clearly, but the vault still retained a dingy atmosphere.

“What a horrendous number of maps!” exclaimed Menonn, gazing around in amazement. “This lot will take forever to hunt through!”

“There evil here too,” said Illmith. “Me feel it.”

“Well, we can now guess that the Vaxen family were heavily into magic,” said Clarne. “They must have cast hundreds of spells down here.”

Menonn nodded. There did seem to be an eerie gloom present within the room. Illmith looked around suspiciously, while Clarne gazed over the huge shelves. The only other place she’d ever seen this many maps was in the library at RiftWood.

“Where do we even start looking?” she asked.

“What was that riddle made up from Jade’s runes?” asked Menonn.

“Beware Vaxen Labyrinth, Beware IllumiJex Blackness, past lie Secrets beyond all Darkness, Power beyond all Magic,” said Illmith and Clarne together.

“We should start using our brains,” said Menonn.

The two girls looked at him.

“This is, at a guess, the end of the Vaxen Labyrinth. The real Vaxen Labyrinth that is, not the hedgerow one in the house gardens.”

The girls nodded.

“And we’ve just got past the IllumiJex’s black magic door,” continued Menonn.

Illmith nodded. Clarne looked shamefully at the floor at this point.

“So stuffed in here, away from prying eyes, must be hard evidence of things beyond mere darkness or magic,” said Menonn.

“I want to find this evidence too, but we could spend forever down here, looking for whatever it is that we’re supposed to be finding,” moaned Clarne.

The three children stared around at the shelves, which towered up to the ceiling. The phrase ‘looking for a needle in a haystack’ scarcely did justice to this problem.

“It no good,” said Illmith frustrated. “We come all this way and now we fail.”

“All right,” said Clarne, “let’s just hunt round a bit.”

The three friends started behaving like expert treasure hunters. They searched every crack in the walls and looked at every object on every shelf. Clarne inspected the candlesticks with an eagle eye. Illmith concentrated on anything even remotely made of metal, hoping her goblin knowledge might help her. Menonn spent a while looking at the large five-pointed star etched on the floor. It was an ancient symbol used in magic but didn’t seem to mean very much at the moment. He wandered over to one of the many boxes full of

wooden tubes. They were covered in dust, cobwebs, dead flies, and a couple of large dead spiders. All not very nice really, and not very useful either.

“Perhaps we’re thinking about this all wrong,” said Menonn presently.

Illmith looked puzzled.

“Go on then,” said Clarne.

“Let’s face it. We’ll never find a secret beyond all darkness. Or something that has power beyond all magic. We’re just simple child adventurers.”

“How do we locate what it is we’re looking for then?” asked Clarne.

“We can’t,” said Menonn slyly. “So if there’s anything down here, we’ll have to wait for it to find us.”

“Oh great!” said Clarne, rolling her eyes up. “And while we’re waiting, some other magic will turn us into stone, or into beetles, or finish us off in another equally nasty way!”

“Maybe you’re right,” said Menonn mournfully. “This is probably all beyond us I think.”

“So we fail after all,” commented Illmith in a sad tone.

Menonn sat down on a chair by a heavy wooden table. Runes had been cut into its surface over many years. It was a mass of symbols. Fancy trying to work out what all that lot means, thought Menonn sadly. Their quest was quite hopeless. Utterly futile.

“Got any sandwiches left?” asked Menonn presently.

“A fine time to be thinking about your stomach,” said Clarne.

“Well maybe I’d be able to think better if I wasn’t so hungry,” responded Menonn.

Clarne sighed.

“What do you want then, ham or pickle?” she asked.

“Pickle,” answered Menonn.

Soon he was munching away. The two girls decided they might as well join him, and so sat around the same table. Illmith chose a ham sandwich, and Clarne decided to have one of each.

“What a great place for a picnic,” said Clarne sarcastically. “Stuck down in the deepest darkest vault imaginable, right under the great house of the Vaxen family, surrounded by dark magic and evil spells. I bet the others are still having a wonderful time at the fairground.”

At the word ‘picnic’, a memory floated into Menonn’s mind. It was of a picnic they’d all been on, late last summer. A wonderful day spent among the whispering Rift Wood trees. Jade had only joined the school a few days before and was still very, very shy. Clarne was then getting over the most serious phase of her illness but was still very unwell. It turned out to be the only day she ventured out of the school all that year. Nevertheless, it had been a really nice time enjoyed by all.

“Clarne?” said Menonn

“Yes?”

“Do you remember that picnic last year?”

“Of course. Why mention it?” asked Clarne.

“Well, wasn’t that the day Brandon dropped a big spider in Jade’s hair?” smiled Menonn.

“Oh yes!” said Clarne. “I recall that. She screamed and screamed and called him a real rotter, and said she’d never speak to him again.”

Menonn felt strange. It was as if something important were about to happen.

“That’s right, and you know what, two of the wooden tubes in that box over there have dead spiders lying on top of them,” he said.

Illmith looked up.

“You think that what we look for?” she asked incredulously.

“Which box?” asked Clarne.

Menonn pointed to the box he’d looked in earlier. Clarne walked across to the tall wooden case and glanced at the tubes. Sure enough, two were topped with dead spiders. She pulled out one and brought it over.

“Secret’s beyond all darkness?” said Clarne, waving the tube so the dead spider fell off. “No cast spell could find them, but Menonn Topell is using his spider power now! What a joke.”

“It wasn’t me. The memory of the picnic just came into my head. I don’t know why.”

Clarne stared hard at Menonn.

“I’ve heard Rhea say similar things. Something comes unbidden into her mind, and she starts reckoning an ethereal empire from her dreams is trying to tell her something.”

“Maybe spider idea real then,” said Illmith a bit coldly. “I never believe in empire before, but your key did work.”

“Well open up the tube anyway,” said Menonn. “What have we to lose?”

Hence, undoing the lid, Clarne pulled out a whole roll of wax-coated parchments. She unwound them carefully over the rune-covered table.

“Where’s this?” she asked.

The maps looked unlike anything the children had ever seen. They were covered in lines and strange writing. Illmith stared at the markings around their edges. Her pale blue face went paler. Menonn fingered through the pile. The maps were quite similar, but not identical.

“Script look familiar to writing of Megron! Me not able read it,” pointed out Illmith.

“Yes, but what about the maps? What are they of?” asked Menonn.

Clarne turned one round. It was not a normal map. Its lines were certainly not roads or tracks.

“Could it be a plan of a mine, you know, showing where all the tunnels are?” suggested Menonn next.

“Perhaps it guide for mines of Megron, from before Dark Mist,” said Illmith, with awe in her voice.

“They must have been huge then. The map goes on for sheet after sheet,” said Menonn.

“No,” said Clarne. “This isn’t Megron.”

“How you know?” asked Illmith, staring at Clarne.

“Look. I bet this is all sea around here. Megron was nowhere near the ocean,” responded Clarne.

Illmith had to agree. The blue shading on the map could definitely be water.

“I know where this is!” said Menonn suddenly. “I recognise the coastline. It’s that big island off to the west, you know, that really weird place.”

“You mean Cillic,” said Clarne.

“That’s the one,” said Menonn. “But what is a map of that desolate kingdom doing down here, covered in writing from the time of Megron?”

"Maybe the mines of Megron were not the only huge mines being dug out, way back then," suggested Clarne.

"Which means these mines were not destroyed by the Mace of Hell," added Menonn. "Could they still exist after thousands of years?"

"Don't ask me. But let's take this whole set of maps with us. We can work out what it means later," said Clarne.

Illmith got up out of her chair, keen to now leave the gloomy forbidden room.

"What about the other dead spider?" asked Menonn.

"You and your spiders!" remarked Clarne.

Menonn stood up from the table, and walking with the aid of his cane, went himself to the wooden box he'd visited earlier. He looked at the many wooden tubes. The one with the remaining dead spider on top was in amongst some others. They all look the same, thought Menonn. He reached out his hand to pick up the tube. It felt cold. Just like the red metal candlestick does when you touch it, Menonn reminded himself. He touched one of the others. That felt normal, if anything in this dark place was normal.

"Well I've got you now," said Menonn quietly to himself, thinking of the dead spider that had given the game away.

Pulling out the cold tube, Menonn next noticed that it felt very heavy. He carried it across to another table, away from the girls, struggled a bit to get the lid off, and pulled out the contents. So this is what all the fuss was about. Unlike before, the tube contained just a single sheet, but it was a sheet of what seemed like metallic paper. All very strange. The whole sheet felt cold and heavy. It's made of those goblin metals, Menonn realised. This was only the third such object they knew of, the

red candlestick and the blue tiara being the other two. Menonn rolled the metal out flat across the table. It made a deep metallic wobbling sound as it unravelled. The noise caused Clarne and Illmith to look across.

At first, it looked like just another map of the heavens. Seen enough of these recently, Menonn thought. So this was supposed to be a secret beyond all darkness, or a power beyond all magic? What bosh! But the map was old. Much older than anything at RiftWood. Menonn started looking at the star patterns. The girls were just getting the other set of maps back into their storage tube.

"Wow! Just look at that!" cried out Menonn suddenly. "It's not there! It's just not there!"

Clarne and Illmith rushed over.

"What is it?" asked Clarne.

"It's not there!" stated Menonn, pointing at an empty black area of sky on the map.

"What not there?" asked Illmith earnestly.

"The star! The blue star! Cobaltus! The one you hate so much. It's completely missing from the sky!" exclaimed Menonn.

"So?" asked Illmith.

"Well don't you get it, you blockhead!" exclaimed Menonn. "It proves the legend of the empire must be true! This map dates from after the time the goblins learned the secrets of metal. Or how else could they have fashioned it? But it also comes from before the promise of the empire. It proves the star Cobaltus appeared out of nowhere. And the only person, who could have thrown a whole real star into the sky, is probably

the same person who's planning this empire we keep talking about. The lone-god of the Anvil legend!"

Illmith looked on with disbelief. Menonn was right. She looked at the script around the map's edge. If anything resembled the pure ancient goblin language, from before the Dark Mist, then this was it. Also, the roll-up metal map appeared to be a piece of genuine goblin workmanship, of the highest order. There was no doubt about that. No one from the race of men could have made anything like this. And there were the heavens, with the Anvil constellation clearly marked, but the blue star was simply not there.

So was this the secret beyond all darkness, and the power beyond all magic, referred to by the runes Jade had found in the sad lonely castle? Were they really all about the empire promised to the goblins, that would unite them with the race of men? If so, then why was this evidence hidden down here? Menonn started to twig as to what might be actually going on. The empire and the IllumiJex must be at odds with each other, almost at war you could say. I wonder why? Menonn felt the answer to that question was a very, very big secret indeed.

"We'll definitely be taking this too," he said, now rolling up the metallic star map.

So with two wooden tubes, the children were about to leave, but Illmith's sharp eyesight saw something move out of the shadows on the floor.

"What that?" she said, pointing.

All three children stared at it. It was a spider. A living one. Trying to find its way from one dark corner of the room to another. The eight-legged creature walked straight into a small piece of paper, lying under the table on which the metallic map

had been placed. Then, dodging this, the spider soon found the edge of some shelves and managed to creep underneath, passing out of sight. Illmith picked up the small square of paper.

"Where this from?" she asked, waving it about.

"Perhaps it fell out of the tube, while Menonn was pulling the star map out," suggested Clarne.

Looking at the symbols on it, Illmith realised they were written in modern-day goblin battle language, just like Jade's runes.

"What do they say?" asked Menonn.

Illmith looked up at the other two.

"Well, go on," said Clarne.

Illmith swallowed.

"They say 'Beware your fate, all you gods. The Empire of All Dreams is coming...'"

"Well there you go," said Menonn. "Still doubt any of this empire business?"

Illmith shook her head.

"Come on," urged Clarne. "We must have what we came for now. Let's just get out of here quick, while we're still alive, and worry about what everything means later."

The three adventurers left the secret room, with their findings, and headed back down the dark passages of the labyrinth. Being clever, they'd made a simple map of their progress on the way in, so soon they were climbing out of the square brick entrance that led into the hidden Vaxen maze. Next, the small party managed to slip out of the vast Vaxen gates by hiding on a large vegetable cart. And soon after that,

they were walking back toward Dale Field, looking like three very ordinary children, even if one was wearing a blue cape over her head, and carrying two wooden tubes. But all three knew they could never view their world in quite the same way. Not ever again.

WATER

- Chapter 29 -
The Star of Cold Blue

What a conversation they all had that evening! Menonn, Clarne and Illmith listened in awe as the others described their epic adventure across that day. An incredible tale of a strange princess, kidnapping, caped crusaders, rail cart rides, pirates, ships doing battle on the high seas, ethereal powers telling them how to win, and much, much more.

Next, Jade, Rhea, Brandon and Naylen heard of the other's escapade into the great Vaxen house, and how in a single day they uncovered more mystery than most people could ever hope to do in a dozen lifetimes. Menonn showed them the metallic map they'd found, the one that practically proved that the legend about the vast goblin empire, the Empire of All Dreams as they now knew it to be called, was all true. Clarne then described, in haunting detail, the pictures of Rudine Vaxen, whose first name was in fact Valaretta. She also mentioned the strange experience which led her to realise that there was in fact such a thing as the Ring of Goblin Force, and that this powerful and dangerous artefact had been in their part of the world, just over a hundred years ago. Then there was the little key, the magical door, and the way they'd been forced to nearly kill each other by IllumiJex spells. The story went on and on and on.

Not surprisingly, it took Illmith Raxxlennin a long time to get to sleep that night. The metallic goblin map, that displayed the constellation of the Anvil, with the blue star clearly missing, couldn't be easily passed off as a hoax. Oh dear, thought

Illmith. The great legend of the lone-god's empire wasn't the complete hogwash she'd been led to think it was all her life. And what about Clarne's certainty concerning the Ring of Goblin Force? There was another fairytale that now seemed an awful lot more real than it ever did before. Illmith's poor mind tore round and round as she lay in bed. So it was sometime after midnight before she finally nodded off.

Like a single small gaming piece, positioned on a vast white playing board, the lone girl stood staring at the immensely bright ground just below her. It was all ice. Pure cold ice. Turning round slowly, a broken visage of water and frozen slabs was all the girl could make out in every direction, as far as the eye could see. There were icebergs, more icebergs, and yet more icebergs, each one aimlessly drifting through a very blue sea. The silence of this place was deafening, and the girl's ears struggled with the complete lack of sound. The air was crisp and cold. The girl's breath froze into an icy vapour, the moment it left either her mouth or nose.

Raising up her head, the sky completely took the girl's breath away. The sun was not yellow or orange or even red. Rather it was a dazzling orb of whitish-blue fire that blazed with unrelenting power in the heavens above. Its ice-cold light caused the sky to take on such an intense hue of pure deep blue, that you couldn't really imagine anything being bluer. Never had she seen, or even thought possible, such an eerie-looking scene.

Why I not cold, Illmith then wondered. She ought to be freezing in this utterly frozen wasteland, but although wearing just the long blue skirt and thin cape that had been part of her

disguise the previous day, there was no sensation of feeling chilly. Soon it also occurred to her, that the large slab of ice she was standing on, was flowing gently with all the other icebergs. Where we all going, she then wondered.

“Well, that could be up to you,” echoed a voice through the cold air.

Illmith whirled around. An old goblin with a wooden stick stood a few paces away. She didn't recognise him, but somehow felt he might be familiar. Perhaps it was seeing a blue face after spending so long a time with different kinds of people, that made him seem more normal. His long white beard blew about slightly in the icy breeze, and the stick he carried was black with a gold-coloured top. Amongst goblin folk, such a stick was a sign of great importance.

“Where we?” Illmith asked respectfully.

“Ah. This world is called Icthamula. It's a place you hate,” answered the old goblin.

Illmith had never heard of Icthamula but thought at once of the goblin hell of Krullen, and of all the stories her people told of that awful place. But this isn't Krullen, she told herself, knowing that to be true. This world had a strange cold beauty about it. She didn't hate it at all.

“I no understand. Why do I hate?” she asked, shaking her head.

The old goblin pointed his stick at the sky.

“What do you think that is?” he asked.

Without thinking, Illmith looked straight up. The unrelenting whitish-blue light of the brilliant sun nearly blinded her. She thrust her head down, shielding her eyes.

“That mean!” she exclaimed.

“I didn't mean you to look right at it,” said the old goblin, shaking his head, and holding forth his gold-tipped staff.

The pain in Illmith's eyes vanished in an instant. She stared back at the old goblin suspiciously, her mind now thinking more clearly. Slowly an ice-cold chill of realisation ran through her. Illmith glanced up into the sky again, but more carefully this time. That was it, she was sure. The Star of Cold Blue. Cobaltus. The one all goblins on Mi-Rethyn hated, with an intense loathing. But in this world, its light filled the entire sky. Maybe this was Krullen after all.

“Impressive, isn't it,” said the old goblin.

Illmith nodded reluctantly. It most certainly was.

“So you finally believe?” suggested the old goblin, looking right at the pale blue girl.

Illmith nodded again. Then rapidly shook her head. All too quickly, a feeling of rage boiled up inside the girl, like the pressurised steam within a whistling kettle, that's been left to boil and boil on a fiery stove for far too long. Illmith now knew this goblin to be the lone-god who'd promised so much for centuries but delivered nothing.

“Maybe star in sky!” she shouted, at the top of her off-key voice. “But your empire of legend never came for goblin people! You not able fix that!”

The old goblin said nothing but pointed the gold tip of his stick at a jagged piece of ice, not far from Illmith. In moments, it shattered into tens of thousands of tiny ice crystals that spayed across the ground like diamond dust. The sight reminded Illmith of Clarne's mercury key, at the instant it had smashed across the underground Vaxen Labyrinth floor.

Where the ice shard had been was now a stick, poking vertically out of the ground. Black, slender, and tipped at both ends with a vicious-looking four-bladed jagged spear point, Illmith recognised it for what it was at once. It was a mycene, a goblin fighting staff. Deadly in the hands of a skilled user, as Illmith was.

“Isn’t it true,” said the old goblin, with a sly smile, “that all goblin children are encouraged to hate the lone-god who created the Star of Cold Blue, and should they ever find him, do what they can to destroy him forever?”

Illmith glared at the old goblin with deep loathing. It was true, she thought. If anyone or anything deserved to be destroyed, then it was this being. This betrayer. This liar. This traitor. The words poured through Illmith’s soul like venom. She looked again at the mycene. Its quality appeared to be the very best.

“What that for?” she asked in a low tone.

“It’s for you,” said the old goblin, “so you can do your best to destroy me.”

Illmith picked up the mycene and began spinning the stick with her clawed hands. Its balance was exceptional even by goblin standards. The deadly blades whistled and hissed as they sliced through the cold icy air. This was ridiculous, thought Illmith, but it all made terrible sense now. The lone-god was going to kill her right here, in this, his own world. On Mi-Rethyn, she’d discovered too many of his secrets, and found out too much hidden information, about his empire that would never truly come. So now he had lured her here, to his own frozen ice world of Icthamula, where he would challenge

her in some foul and nasty fight to the death. But how was she supposed to destroy a living god?

Next, the goblin girl watched with increasing fear as two sets of four blades grew out of the ends of the old goblin’s black staff. The blades at one end were gold in colour. Illmith then realised that she was finally finished. She had always been finished. Her whole life had been one long series of bitter disappointments and frustrations, that had just tumbled her way, one after another, making her existence a very miserable one. If she was to die in this icy place then that was that. How many other goblins had the lone-god brought here and slaughtered amongst these icebergs she wondered. She then considered what she was wearing. More anger and rage flooded through her.

“I not able fight in this long dress!” she exclaimed. “It unfair!”

“Very true,” said the old goblin.

In an instant, Illmith was wearing a metallic pleated skirt and canvas material top. Over her calves and forearms were goblin-fashioned metallic greaves. Light and strong, they were perfect for protection and perfect for mobility. But Illmith was feeling such rage flowing through her veins now, that she wondered if some spell might be acting on her mind and emotions.

“You use magic to make me want fight,” she stated coldly, through clenched teeth. “Just like Vaxen door make me fight friends.”

“There is no magic here,” responded the old goblin simply. “All the hate you feel is truly you.”

“Me try and be nice person. It you fill me with your hate,” she said angrily.

“You were trained to hate as a child. It was nothing to do with me,” responded the old goblin, starting to twirl his mycene over his head.

That was the final straw for Illmith. She lost control of reason and struck the first blow. Her mycene smashed into the old goblin’s with a deafening crack, and in an instant, she’d swung round again, and hit out from the other side. But the old goblin was fast and parried the blow with ease. Illmith’s next came a split moment after, and soon she was whacking, smashing, and jabbing her staff again and again at the old goblin. Every blow however was stopped, blocked or rebuffed by the older combatant. Hissing through the air, her blades cut into the goblin’s stick over and over again.

Round and round they circled as the fight went on. Illmith was surprised at first that the old goblin didn’t seem to be attacking back, he just defended himself. However, as the fight went on, he struck out at her more and more. Soon both of them were fully engaged. It was the sort of encounter that would have made gladiator crowds of old jump up and down while yelling and cheering and braying for blood! And all the while, the immense blue light of Cobaltus beat down on the two combatants.

Illmith was now struggling to defend herself adequately. Using all her skill, she could only just about parry the attacking power of the older goblin. He wait for me to make error, and then he strike me down, she thought desperately. The contest continued on, but eventually, Illmith slipped badly on some wet ice and crashed to the ground in a roll, while at the same

moment, the older goblin smashed her mycene clean out of her hands with a mighty blow. She shut her eyes firmly, expecting to die at any moment. But no death blow came.

It was some while before she felt brave enough to let her eyes open again. Light from the bright ground told her she was still alive.

“Why not kill me?” she asked, rolling around and sitting up.

“Because I don’t want to,” said the old goblin, his mycene upright by his side.

“Then why we fight?” she asked, frowning.

“To help you,” he answered. “To free you from your hatred. You’ve tried to destroy me, like you were taught as a child, but you never need try again.”

Illmith was lost. How was fighting supposed to help anybody hate less? Then another thought flashed through her mind.

“You not really goblin. You speak like race of men.”

“I’m as goblin as you are,” he answered.

“How?” asked Illmith.

“It’s easy. I know everything about you, so I could speak like you and act like you anytime I wanted. I’m trying to bring goblins and men back together you know.”

Illmith was now thoroughly confused.

“What I really doing here? Why I not in bed in Dale Field!” she then said, getting frustrated yet again.

“You still are. This is just a dream, but let’s not talk about that,” said the old goblin. “Let’s talk instead about the future.”

“A dream? The future?” said Illmith, with a look of puzzlement across her face.

“Yes. The entire future of your world Mi-Rethyn. I take it you want to be a part of the future?”

Illmith still didn't understand a thing this old goblin was babbling on about, but she nodded anyway. It was probably a lot easier than asking for things to be explained.

Just then a splashing sound came from Illmith's left. Glancing round she watched some large, strange-looking black and white birds struggle out of the water and hobble onto the ice. The old goblin thought for a moment, while Illmith gazed at the birds trying to walk. They did look funny, wobbling about on their stubby little legs. A slight smile crossed her face. The old goblin was glad at that. This girl and her people have suffered a lot over the years, he decided. It was time to do something about that.

“Illmith?”

The girl looked back from the funny birds to the old goblin again. He seemed quite serious now.

“You and your friends are currently in the biggest and most exciting adventure going,” he said. “To help you out somewhat, I gave that nice girl Clarne the little key you saw earlier. It was a very powerful gift. What would you care to receive?”

Illmith thought for a moment or two.

“Can I ask anything to be mine?”

“Anything you request,” said the old goblin, holding up his stick, which no longer had any blades fixed upon it, and appeared to be completely undamaged, despite Illmith's earlier attempts to hack it into matchwood.

A nice big bag of tasty rellen-grapes loomed large in Illmith's mind. But no. That would be too easy. Why not try and show this Star of Cold Blue god what a liar he really was,

and ask for something really difficult. Her mind wandered back over the previous day. So many things had happened, but the events in the picture gallery came into focus.

“Can I ask question?”

“A gift, and a question, now is it?” said the old goblin, who was currently using his stick to draw shapes in the snow on the ground. “Very well, do go on.”

“Ring of Goblin Force. It truly real?” asked the girl.

The old goblin stopped drawing.

“It is very real, and it is not called the ‘Ring of Goblin Force’ for nothing. It is very dangerous.”

“I thought it fairytale, but Clarne say Valaretta Rudine Vaxen had it,” said Illmith.

“She did. For a while.”

Illmith remembered the picture of miserable Rudine in the Vaxen gallery and the deeply sad atmosphere that had cloaked the lonely old castle. I bet ring once ended up at castle too, she then thought. Of course, considered Illmith, if this lone-god had anything to do with the ring, then no wonder it made everybody miserable. His empire certainly did.

“Why it make her sad?” asked Illmith. “Everywhere ring go, people and places go sad.”

“You've just had one question answered,” replied the old goblin. “How about your request for a gift?”

Illmith felt her temper rising again. This was all as frustrating as ever.

“That not fair! Life never fair,” she said, her off-key voice starting to rise.

“Not fair?” said the old goblin in astonishment. “I make you an offer without limit, and you say it's not fair!”

Illmith looked at the ice on the ground and kicked some loose bits hard with her foot. Some of them sprayed over the design the old goblin had drawn in the snow.

"I want ring of force, to help my people, but I not want it if it make me sad," said Illmith finally.

It was an impressive request. This girl has real potential the old goblin thought.

"You know, there are things even more powerful than the goblin ring," he said.

"So?" retorted Illmith.

"So wouldn't you want one of those?"

"I don't know thing more powerful. But maybe goblin ring help my people and their future."

"The future of your people is the Empire of All Dreams," the old goblin reminded Illmith.

"I not trust empire. Empire never come. But I trust ring. I want you give me ring of legend."

"You trust the ring?" said the old goblin in surprise. "But you didn't even believe the ring was real until yesterday! You thought it was a children's fairy story, and even now you have no idea as to what it really is."

Illmith almost flew into a rage once more, but then thought better of it. She guessed that this blue star god talked nothing but rhubarb. He won't give me anything, and here come his excuses.

"How about if I give the ring to you within a year?" said the old goblin looking around. "Of course, I'll have to change the course of history to do it, but I guess that was always the plan anyway."

Illmith was shocked at hearing this.

"Changing history? You mean you promise what I ask?" she said in her strange voice.

"The Ring of Goblin Force will be yours within a year," promised the old goblin.

"Will it make me sad?" Illmith asked quietly.

"No," said the old goblin simply.

Illmith, of course, didn't really believe any of this. The sooner she woke up, the better. She looked back at the funny black and white birds. They did look so amusing, hobbling about on the ice and flapping their flippers. She'd never seen anything like them before. A couple sort of toppled over the edge of the ice slab and splashed back into the cold water. The sight almost made Illmith laugh. She hadn't laughed very much in a long time. Once in the ocean though, the black and white birds could swim like lightning and off they sped, out of sight.

"They very funny," she said, chuckling.

"Yes they are, aren't they," agreed the old goblin.

Looking at one of her blue-clawed hands, which still hurt slightly from when the mycene had been smashed out of it, Illmith's face went hard again.

"This is dream. None of what you say will happen."

"This is a dream. But in the Empire of All Dreams, this is where everything can happen."

The icebergs began to disappear, and the immense blue sun gradually dimmed in the sky.

"Within a year," said the old goblin quietly. "Remember that Illmith. Within a year."

Darkness flooded over everything.

**- Chapter 30 -
An Epic New Challenge**

The celebration on the quayside was fantastic. These people from Cillic didn't just know how to fight, they knew how to party as well! There were several large hog roasts, dripping with fat, that slowly turned on huge spits, suspended over glowing fires of coal and charcoal. Then there were all kinds of exotic fruit and dishes of food, piled up high on tables all around the quayside, along with every kind of ale and drink you could imagine. The Cillic soldiers had obviously been all over the harbour and bought up everything in sight. Naturally, Gellen invited all the harbour workers and fishermen in the area along as well, so it really was a big occasion.

And that music! Fast rhythm dance music was playing out from several bands of drummers, and with a large square having been cordoned off to provide a dance arena, everybody was just having a great time! Jade, Menonn, Brandon, Clarne, Rhea, Illmith and Naylen were all there. They each spoke with Qirune, who quickly took to the group of children, and was soon enjoying their company.

As late afternoon rolled on into early evening, Rhea, Naylen, Qirune, and Captain Gellen met on the Ice Raven's deck to talk about important things. The sound of wild party music continued to echo off the quayside, and could still be heard clearly on the ship. The fires, from the hog roasts, now served as lights, and groups of people gathered around them to swap tall stories of great adventure, and daring deeds, done on the high seas. Back on the Ice Raven, Gellen spoke first.

"Your performance yesterday was amazing, and we are forever indebted to you, but Her Royal Highness and myself were wondering if you might be able to help us again."

"We'd be delighted to!" said Rhea at once. "What do you need?"

Gellen nodded to Qirune. She looked down at the ship deck, her face forlorn. Rhea continued to think it strange why a princess like her should appear so miserable, so often. Eventually, Qirune looked up.

"It's about my brother," she said sadly.

"Go on," said Rhea encouragingly, sensing it to be a painful subject for Qirune.

"Well, he disappeared almost two years ago. It happened on a fine spring day, a bit like yesterday I suppose."

Yesterday had been an absolutely exceptional day, thought Rhea. Qirune continued, her voice having a strange far off quality as she recounted events from the past.

"I remember us both getting up early that morning. It was a beautiful day, with sunlight streaming into the castle courtyards, where we lived on Cillic. Myl-Nenthon, that's my brother, decided it was a perfect morning to go riding on his fine horse, Flint. I can still remember him turning the horse round in the courtyard, and saying to me something like 'Such mornings as this, are made for the likes of princes and kings to ride upon!'"

Qirune paused.

"He then rode out of the castle gates at full gallop but never came back. His horse was never found. It's as if he rode into clear thin air."

Rhea wanted to embrace Qirune at that point, and show her some sympathy, but she thought it wouldn't be appropriate to hug a princess. However, she now understood why an air of sadness hung around the girl. Qirune looked gloomily at Rhea and Naylen.

"They looked everywhere for him. Everywhere. Everybody did. We had soldiers come over to the mainland, by the shipload, and hunt around for over a year. But no one has been able to find even a trace of him. My brother would have made a good king. He was fair, a bit wild at times maybe, but did have lots of interesting ideas for making Cillic a better place to live in. But with him gone, I may have to rule instead, and I don't think I'll be a very good queen."

"Your Royal Highness will make a magnificent queen," interjected Gellen.

Qirune said nothing.

"Where do we fit in then?" asked Naylen, who had listened intently throughout.

"Well," said Gellen. "It's obviously clear, that you lot from this RiftWood School are a cut above most adventurers, and seem able to uncover any mystery there is."

"We're not better than other people," responded Rhea. "We've just been a bit lucky."

"There's no luck as good as yours," stated Gellen. "Either you're better than everyone else, or someone is helping you."

Someone helping us? The thought had never occurred to Rhea quite like that before. But the idea that someone, somewhere, was actually assisting them from behind the scenes, with all their adventuring, did make a bit of sense. The word 'Empire' floated into Rhea's mind.

"So?" asked Naylen. "What's the deal?"

Gellen was about to speak, but Qirune got there first.

"Will you help find my brother?" she asked in a simple tone. Naylen and Rhea looked at each other.

"Please help me," said Qirune with an edge of desperation in her voice, thinking their delay in answering was because they didn't want to take up the challenge.

"We'd love to help," said Rhea. "But what can we do?"

Gellen glanced at Qirune. Naylen guessed that one of them was about to say something important. Qirune gave Gellen a simple hand signal. He cleared his throat.

"What we are about to discuss next, is not to be repeated to others."

"Of course," said Naylen.

"What about our friends?" asked Rhea.

"Only if you trust them," said Qirune.

"I trust all my friends," said Rhea,

"Wish I could," said Qirune quietly.

"Anyway," said Gellen. "What we are trying to say, is we have reason to believe that a secret group of people, well versed in the art of magic, were responsible for Myl-Nenthon's disappearance, and were probably also behind the attempted kidnapping of our Qirune yesterday."

Naylen felt cold all of a sudden. He knew exactly who Gellen was speaking about.

"You mean the IllumiJex don't you," said Naylen almost in a whisper.

"You've heard of them, then?" asked Qirune.

"Sort of. A whisper here, a goblin riddle there, that kind of thing," remarked Naylen.

“Well take our word for it, they are more than just a whisper or a riddle,” responded Gellen.

“We know,” said Naylen in a low voice. “Some of our friends ran into their handiwork yesterday, and nearly got themselves killed.”

“Is that why you’re really here then?” asked Rhea. “Did you hope that by coming to the Vaxen city of WixWyn, you might be able to follow up on a few leads?”

“Not really. The Vaxens were heavily involved with the IllumiJex up until just over a hundred years ago. Then something happened that changed all that, but we don’t know what,” answered Gellen.

Rhea remembered Clarne telling her about the picture of Valaretta Rudin Vaxen, dated 1999, and the Ring of Goblin Force she was sure Valaretta had once owned. That would have been one hundred and fifteen years ago, she thought, around about the same time. Her head started to spin. The ring, Valaretta, or Rudine as she was sometimes called, the Vaxens, the IllumiJex, and the sad lonely castle were all connected in some way. But how? Rhea had no idea.

“We don’t know what happened back then either,” said Rhea to Gellen, “but we did find ancient maps of Cillic in an underground vault beneath the Vaxen house. So the IllumiJex must of be interested in Cillic for some reason back then.”

“And even if the IllumiJex are still interested today, we don’t know why, or where to start looking for your brother Myl-Nenthon,” said Naylen to Qirune. “We also have no idea why they wanted you either.”

“I was hoping you’d investigate all that, you know, go on a treasure hunt, but look for him instead of for gold or relics,” said Qirune.

Naylen thought for a moment. He hadn’t considered that before. Seeking out Myl-Nenthon would be like a treasure-hunting adventure, except you were looking for a person instead of hunting down objects. But the future king of Cillic was a good enough treasure for anyone to spend their time finding. Naylen smiled.

“Your Highness, it would be an honour for me to accept this epic challenge of finding your brother. It may take a while though,” said Naylen carefully. “These things are often far more complicated than they at first appear.”

“Take all the time you need,” said Gellen.

Qirune, however, knew that time was important.

“It would be nice if my father, King Tolis the Second, could see his son Myl-Nenthon alive once again. My father has not been the same since he vanished and now is very ill. Some say he will not last the summer,” said Qirune slowly. “But he tells me he wants to see his son before he dies.”

A tear rolled down the princess’ face. Rhea was desperate to comfort Qirune but didn’t know how. Naylen could also sense the girl’s pain.

“I’ll do what I can, I promise,” he said.

Gellen reached into his cloak and carefully pulled out a short gold sceptre, with a beautifully fashioned Red Raven fixed to one end. It was the symbol of Cillic, just like the one set in the ornate golden headband that even now Qirune was wearing. Gellen handed it to the princess.

“You will know my brother by the Red Raven upon his forehead,” said Qirune.

Both Naylen and Rhea remembered seeing the princess at the top of the rail cart ride, without her ornate headband on. If Myl-Nenthon had the same emblem upon his forehead, then he would stand out like a full moon in the night sky.

“This,” said Qirune, handing Naylen the short sceptre, “is the property of the Kings of Cillic. It will be proof to Myl-Nenthon that I have sent you. Of course, you have to promise to guard it with your life, or I can’t entrust it into your care.”

Naylen looked at the potent symbol of the Red Raven, fixed to the end of the sceptre. It was an emblem of ancient power, just as the one on the golden headband often gave Qirune her aura of greatness.

“I do promise,” said Naylen simply.

The sceptre was placed into his hand. Naylen’s fingers closed over it tightly. This really was going to be some adventure.

“One question?” suggested Naylen.

“Yes?” said Gellen.

“If Myl-Nenthon vanished, some two years ago, then how can you be certain he is still alive?” Naylen asked.

Rhea saw Qirune’s face go hard. Oh dear, she thought.

“I believe he is alive!” snapped the princess in a cold voice. “If you do not, then perhaps I should take that sceptre back, and send someone else who does.”

Gellen wondered if Qirune had been a bit hard. She was like that at times, but Naylen thought she’d spoken like a true queen. He bowed his head in respect.

“If Her Royal Highness says that Myl-Nenthon is alive, then he is alive, and I will find him.”

Qirune’s face returned to its usual sad state.

“I’m sorry,” she apologised.

Gellen, who rarely heard the princess apologise to anyone, spoke up.

“Her Royal Highness is tired and needs rest. You and your friends are, of course, free to stay and enjoy the party for as long as you please.”

The drumming music hadn’t ceased for a single moment while they’d been talking.

“Thank you,” said Naylen and Rhea together.

Qirune was about to wander off toward the Ice Raven’s royal cabin, but before doing so she turned to Rhea.

“I wish I had friends like yours,” said the princess, “and I wish I went to this RiftWood School you are always talking about. It sounds simply wonderful.”

“We consider you to be one of our friends. All of us do. We won’t forget you, and I’m sure RiftWood would be happy for you to come and visit, anytime you wish,” stated Rhea.

“My best friend at the moment is the little dog I met while being kidnapped. He seems to like me,” said the lonely princess.

Qirune glanced toward her cabin, where her new pet was snoozing, and then glanced back at Rhea.

“Perhaps we will meet again?”

“Perhaps,” said Rhea, who certainly hoped they would.

Qirune paused.

“May your ships endure the storm,” she then said simply to both Naylen and Rhea.

Next, and with a slight smile, she turned and was gone. Gellen bowed to them both and then followed after Qirune.

“She is strange, isn’t she?” said Rhea to Naylen, once they were alone.

“Yes, but like Gellen said, she will make a magnificent queen.”

“Let’s hope you find Myl-Nenthon, so she doesn’t have to.”

“Indeed,” said Naylen.

Soon after, Rhea and Naylen rejoined the other children. They stayed at the quayside party for a short while longer and then started to think about returning to Dale Field for the night.

“Do you think we’ll see Qirune or this ship ever again?” asked Brandon to Jade and Rhea. “It would be such a shame if we didn’t.”

“I do hope so!” exclaimed Jade. “I’m sure Qirune is a really nice person when she’s not having to act like a princess all the time. I bet if she were just another girl at RiftWood, we’d all really like her.”

“I’m sure we would,” said Rhea, in a knowing kind of way.

The three children looked again at the Ice Raven. Although they’d only known the ship for a day or so, they were going to miss it. Menonn came up, along with Clarne and Illmith.

“So this is your ship, that you steered into battle,” said Menonn, looking at it with wide eyes in the dim light.

“That’s the one!” said Brandon proudly.

“Do goblins have ships?” asked Clarne of Illmith.

“Not good as this,” admitted Illmith, shaking her head.

The children took one last look at the continuing party, spread as it was along the quayside, and then left with Naylen toward Dale Field.

- Chapter 31 -

Extreme Danger and Whispering Trees

Red hot lava sprayed across the vast gulf beneath the narrow stone bridge, while a sound akin to thousands of hissing snakes ricocheted about, as various gases pushed their way through cracks in the rock faces far below. Liquid stone splashed down like orange paint against the mountainsides, and now and again, the depths of the valley below came into view, between clouds of smoke that drifted and billowed from the boiling mud pits deep beneath. Above, the sky was an ashen grey. There was no blue and no sun. Only a hazy dim light by which to see.

Brandon stood at the edge of the stone bridge and gazed over the scene. Only in a nightmarish dream could you imagine such a place. Menonn, standing next to him, thought exactly the same.

“Have we died and gone to Hell?” he asked.

“I hope not. I didn’t think I was that bad in life to deserve this,” said Brandon, looking around warily.

“Somebody obviously thought you were,” said Menonn, trying to lighten the mood.

A figure appeared at the far end of the narrow bridge and started to move toward them.

“Here comes trouble,” said Brandon quietly to his friend.

Another surge of lava crashed against the rocks, just to one side of the simple stone bridge. Huge clouds of thick smoke billowed up. The figure, dressed in a long bluish-grey cloak, approached slowly. He looked like a fairly old man, walking with a staff.

“Greetings to you, young men. I’m so glad to finally be able to make your acquaintance,” he said pleasantly.

Neither Brandon nor Menonn had the faintest clue as to what was going on. They just looked at each other stunned.

“I hear they teach many things at that RiftWood School, but good manners obviously aren’t one of them,” said the old man next.

“Sorry sir,” stammered Brandon, “we didn’t mean to ignore you. I just didn’t know what to say.”

“A poor excuse, but let us not worry about it for now.”

Menonn thought they had plenty to be worried about.

“Is this the Abyss of the Dead?” he asked.

“No,” said the old man. “This is the Bridge of Ackleen on the world of Sibthane. What you see here is actually one of the nicer parts of Sibthane. Most of the rest is bubbling black tar. Except for the oceans of course. But they are not filled with water or fish. Here, there are just endless metallic seas of hot mercury, along with the vast rock formations that float across them, like gigantic grey icebergs the size of entire mountains. Needless to say, nobody but nobody lives here anymore.”

“Who built this Bridge of Ackleen then?” asked Brandon, thinking it a clever question.

“Ah, now that’s a very long story, which maybe I’ll tell you one day, but not today.”

More lava sprayed across the gulf under the bridge in a gleaming orange arc. Menonn then noticed for the first time that he didn’t have his cane, and in fact, didn’t need it. This place may be as near to Hell as he would ever see, but his left leg was in perfect shape.

“This isn’t real, is it?” he said. “My leg feels fine, which means I must be dreaming.”

Brandon looked at Menonn.

“Hang on! I’m the one who’s dreaming here, not you. You just happen to be a part of my latest nightmare.”

“Oh no! It’s definitely me who’s doing the dreaming,” countered Menonn matter-of-factly, “and neither of you two, or this weird landscape, are the slightest bit real!”

The two boys were about to argue, but the old man spoke up.

“I did not bring you both here, to listen to you squabble,” he said rather sharply.

Menonn and Brandon shut up instantly.

“Why are we here then?” asked Brandon.

“You two are involved in this little mystery adventure that’s going on at the moment, aren’t you?” responded the old man.

Menonn and Brandon glanced at each other again. How much should they say, they wondered. They didn’t know who this old man was. Perhaps he couldn’t be trusted.

“We might be,” said Menonn finally.

“You might be,” said the old man, smiling. “You send an IllumiJex hired pirate ship to the bottom of the ocean, on a fine sunny day, in full view of everybody. Your friend discovers that the Ring of Goblin Force is no myth, but is actually a real object that was in your part of the world not so long ago. You then break through a magical three-tonne metal door that hasn’t been opened for over a hundred years. Next, you steal what are probably the two most valuable maps on the whole of Mi-Rethyn. In addition, there’s the small matter of making friends with Her Royal Highness, Princess Qirune, whom

young Rhea just happened to meet, on top of the biggest rail cart ride that’s ever been built!”

Brandon shrugged his shoulders.

“All in a day’s adventuring,” he said proudly. “We do this sort of thing all the time.”

“Maybe so,” said the old man slyly, “but what do you think the IllumiJex are going to do when they put all of this together and come up with a certain school in the middle of Wixingdale?”

“Oh heck! I hadn’t really thought of that,” said Brandon slowly. “Had you?” he then asked Menonn.

Menonn shook his head, while the colour started to drain from his face.

“I suppose we’ve put the RiftWood School in great danger,” said Brandon in alarm. “The IllumiJex will probably come and burn it to the ground, or cast loads of spells over it, so all its buildings collapse into heaps of rubble!”

“What are we going to do?” cried out Menonn, realising they were in fact doomed. “This really is a nightmare! We’ll all be killed in our beds, in the dead of night. I just know it!”

“That might not happen,” said the old man.

“How can you be so sure?” exclaimed Brandon. “It’s alright for you. You don’t live in the real world!”

“Have you heard the trees of the Rift Wood whisper to one another in the wind?” asked the old man.

“Of course,” said Brandon, thinking that to be a very odd question to now be asking.

“How do they make you feel?” the old man asked.

Menonn felt an important point was about to be made. Better not answer with a joke.

“To be honest, the trees make me feel a little nervous,” he said thoughtfully. “It’s like they know all about you, and constantly watch you, even without eyes.”

Brandon nodded. When he was in the wood, he sometimes wondered if the trees were whispering about him, behind his back. It was an uncanny experience.

“Ah, well let me tell you a little secret,” said the old man.

Brandon and Menonn were all ears.

“The Rift Wood trees are full of ethereal power. I should know because I put it there long ago. When they watch you and whisper about you, they’re really trying to decide if you’re worth protecting from magical harm. So if I have a quiet word with them, maybe they’ll keep your school hidden from the IllumiJex, for a little longer.”

“We would certainly appreciate that,” stated Menonn.

“Are you some sort of wizard then, to cast a spell on a whole wood?” asked Brandon.

“Me a wizard? Or a spell caster? Certainly not!” said the old man.

“What are you then?” asked Menonn.

“I am a god.”

Oh great! This dream is getting sillier by the moment, thought Brandon.

“Are you trying to say you’re some sort of forest tree-god, and that the Rift Wood is your home?” asked Menonn, trying to be intelligent.

“Look around you, young man. If I’m the Rift Wood tree god, then what would we be doing here?”

A huge pocket of gas and steam blasted up through the boiling mud pits far below, causing hot brown liquid to spray

high into the air. Fortunately, the Bridge of Ackleen was sufficiently high that the mud couldn’t reach it. Menonn then realised there were, in fact, no trees on this world.

“If you’re not a tree god, then which god are you then?” he asked next.

“The one that will sort out all the others,” said the old man in a low voice.

It was such a simple answer. Too simple for Menonn’s liking.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he then asked.

“It means what it sounds like,” said the old man. “I’ll tell you another little secret too. The gods of this, that, and the other, that many people believe in, aren’t really what most of those people think they are.”

“Well, that’s no surprise,” cut in Brandon quickly. “I don’t believe in any gods. I don’t even believe in you as it happens. I still think this is just a dream.”

“It is,” said the old man. “But what few people know indeed, is that all these gods are working together and that they are the ones who really control the IllumiJex.”

“And what are the IllumiJex?” asked Menonn. “We found their secret room in the labyrinth under the big Vaxen house.”

“Yes you did, but they are bigger than a dusty old room,” said the old man.

“They hid a load of stuff in there. Some of it was about a weird thing called The Empire of All Dreams. We wondered if that was the empire the goblin people once believe in,” said Menonn. “Not that they seem to believe in it anymore.”

The Empire of All Dreams? Brandon thought for a moment. Of course! How obvious, he realised, when he suddenly twigged what was in fact going on.

“We’re in the Empire of All Dreams right now, aren’t we? I mean, this whole dream we’re having is a part of your Empire!”

“Very good,” said the old man, smiling.

“So that’s your game, is it? An empire built in people’s heads, that is of no use in the real world! You’ve been tricking the goblins and everybody else all along, haven’t you?” continued Brandon.

The old man said nothing. He merely looked around at the awe-inspiring scenery about them.

“What about the girls? Are they in your crazy dream empire as well?” asked Menonn.

“Yes. In fact, they’ve already come here,” said the old man.

“What, to this horrible place?” asked Menonn.

“The Empire spans many worlds. I did not bring them to this one,” said the old man.

“So how come they got to this empire before we did?” asked Brandon. “I mean that’s hardly fair, is it?”

“Not fair? I let you in on the biggest and most powerful secret there is, and you say it’s not fair!” exclaimed the old man. “They really don’t teach you any manners at RiftWood, do they? Perhaps I should speak with Chief Master Mr Ashterrie about this sometime. I mean, haven’t you two ever heard of the phrase ‘ladies first’?”

“Ladies first!” exclaimed Brandon. “What absolute bosh!”

“Well, there is it,” said the old man, picking up his stick. “I do have some manners, so I invited the girls here first. Now you

must excuse me, young men. I have much work to be getting on with.”

“And what are we supposed to do?” asked Brandon.

“I’d enjoy the summer for a while if I were you. Some dangerous events are certainly going to be keeping you busy before it’s over,” replied the old man, with a sly look in his eye. “Good day to you both.”

The old man was then about to wander off, but before he did so, he bent down and picked up a small grey pebble sitting on the bridge path.

“You better keep this,” he said, tossing the pebble toward the boys. “It might just come in handy.”

Menonn found that, in this place, he was able to move easily and quickly enough to catch the pebble with one hand, before it sailed over the bridge edge, and into the boiling mud pits far below. Both boys then watched the old man walk off with his staff, to the far side of the bridge, where he promptly vanished into thin air.

“What in this world of Sibthane was that all about?” asked Brandon slowly.

“Don’t ask me,” said Menonn, feeling the small pebble now in his hand. “I’m as clueless as you are.”

Moments later, the volcanic scene dissolved around them into utter blackness.

- Chapter 32 -

Speckled Pebbles and the Start of Summer

Despite having been on the most exciting trip of their entire lives, everybody was so glad to be back at the Academy. Compared to much of the world, the familiar trees of the Rift Wood, surrounding the school on all sides, gave you such a sense of safety and peace that you couldn't help but feel good about coming home, no matter where you might have been. And home it was! Although none of the children technically lived at the school, most having homes where their parents were, it was still a home from home for them, at this point in their lives.

Over the next few days, Salice, Kallijine, Demos, Mr Ashterrie and farmer Flance got to hear all their stories several times over, until they were almost able to tell each other exactly, word for word, what had happened.

Naylen and Mr Ashterrie then had many long conversations, that often continued deep into the night. They discussed and debated all kinds of fascinating matters, and kept coming up with no end of wild ideas as to what might be really going on, across their world of Mi-Rethyn. In addition, endless numbers of books and maps and family histories found their way from the library, or the school vault, into Mr Ashterrie's office. Soon it resembled a real second-hand junk shop!

Then, after a few more days of enjoying the peace and quiet of the school grounds, Naylen decided it was time to be true to the promise he'd given to Princess Qirune. Thus getting his things together, he prepared to set off into the unknown, to try

and locate Qirune's missing brother, Prince Myl-Nenthon Tolis. Given the extremely dangerous nature of the shadowy IllumiJex organisation, Naylen decided it would be far better if he travelled on his own. Before finally leaving though, he and Mr Ashterrie talked one last time in the Chief Master's cluttered-up office.

"You've certainly stirred a few things up since coming here," said Mr Ashterrie.

"Part of my job as an adventurer!" said Naylen smiling.

"Indeed," responded Ashterrie. "I should have known that nothing would remain peaceful once you appeared!"

"I shall take that as a compliment," said Naylen.

"It was intended as such," said Mr Ashterrie. "Try not to stay away for so long this time, however."

Naylen looked around the now familiar office. He had no idea when he would see this place again.

"Finding Myl-Nenthon could take a while," said Naylen carefully.

"But it is unlikely to take one with your rare skill, eleven years to find a missing boy," said the Chief Master, looking straight at his old pupil.

"We shall see," said Naylen smiling. "We shall see."

He and Mr Ashterrie then shook hands. Naylen gazed one last time at the huge picture of the whispering Rift Wood trees, at the far end of the office. With it firmly fixed in his memory, he then left the room.

Mounting his large black horse outside the main school entrance, Naylen Shaw, adventurer and treasure hunter, was

ready to begin his most challenging quest yet. Brandon and Menonn both had tears in their eyes as he was about to set off.

“We don’t want you to go!” they both kept saying.

“But I have a promise to keep for Qirune,” Naylen kept responding. “I can’t let the princess down can I?”

“Well, you make sure you come back,” stated Brandon.

“You can count on it,” said Naylen.

“Is that a promise too?” asked Menonn.

Naylen thought for a moment. You never made promises lightly.

“When I’ve found Myl-Nenthon, I’ll come back. You have my word.”

That was good enough for Brandon and Menonn. This was one man who meant what he said.

“May your ship endure the storm!” said Brandon.

“Yours too, young man,” said Naylen smiling. “Yours too.”

Turning to the four girls, he lifted his finger to his furry black helm in respect.

“Take care you lot,” he said, “until we all meet again.”

“You’re the one who needs to take care!” said Rhea, nearly crying.

Jade, Clarne and Illmith also wished him a teary farewell. Naylen then turned his horse around and headed slowly up the school drive. He’d done this eleven years before. Left the academy for what he thought was the last time. Hopefully, I’ll be back well before another eleven years have passed. At the top of the drive, Naylen turned round one last time, to wave at the small crowd which had gathered to see him off. Such a good group of people. Such loyal friends. He would miss them deeply. Then with his face set to the task ahead, Naylen turned

his horse round, and headed off down the Rift Wood road to Loxrift and beyond.

At the other end of the drive, all the children finally burst into tears. It was heartbreaking to see him go, but they all agreed that it was a brave thing he was doing. After a while, they got themselves together and went inside.

Salice and Kallijine wandered slowly back to the kitchen. Once there, Mrs Habbit scolded them for letting all the pots of cabbage boil freely over the coal cookers, and thus make a complete mess of the floor. Such is life, thought Salice, as she started to clean up the hot and greenish coloured cabbage-water, with a large natural sponge.

Jade and Illmith decided to trek off to the stable, to take their horses Nester and Gatchwin out for a gallop.

“Horses be glad for ride,” said Illmith.

“You bet!” said Jade. “Nester’s probably gone lame, standing about in those stables for the last few days.”

Hence, before they knew it, both girls were racing through the Rift Wood meadows at high speed, thinking of all the adventures they’d had, and wondering about those that were to come.

Since their return from WixWyn, Illmith had spent much time alone in the library, staring and staring and re-staring at the metallic map Menonn had found under the Vaxen house. She still found it hard to accept all that it implied, but at least her blue blood didn’t boil over with rage quite so easily whenever the dream-based empire came up in conversation. In addition, an odd dream she’d had herself, a few days ago, also

seemed to have helped her. What had that been about? Oh yes, ice and funny birds and violent fighting. Illmith had no idea as to what it all meant, but she began to notice how she was a slightly calmer person now, though the others still assured her that out of the six of them, she was still, by far, the most fiery! Never mind. There's nothing wrong with having strong feelings Illmith thought.

"So," said Rhea. "What now?"

Clarne thought for a bit. It was mid-afternoon in the Chief Master's garden. A plate of current buns and dried apricots was attracting the attention of several red and yellow bees. The humming creatures filled the air over the tasty snacks.

"Summer has hardly started, we can have such a wonderful time," Clarne answered.

"I was talking about the mystery," said Rhea, hitting her friend gently on the arm.

"The mystery can wait for a while I think," replied Clarne.

She still hadn't come to terms with the incident involving the rune-covered IllumiJex door. She would never forget seeing the way the little key opened that door under the Vaxen house. And she would never, ever forget what happened afterwards when she, Menonn and Illmith had all turned on each other with such hatred, thanks to an ancient IllumiJex spell. The key did eventually save them, but Clarne was in no hurry to go exploring again, anytime soon.

"I doubt it can wait," said Rhea. "We have an evil organisation called the IllumiJex, that even now are probably planning and scheming to dominate the whole of Mi-Rethyn. Then there's this legendary Ring of Goblin Force, out there

somewhere, on the loose, and who knows what that thing's all about. Naylen's gone off on some great quest to look for Myl-Nenthon. Our friend Qirune could be Queen of Cillic by the autumn. While Illmith is determined to stay here at RiftWood for at least a year because she's sure that something of great importance is going to happen. And..."

Rhea paused.

"And...?" asked Clarne, puzzled.

"...and then there's this Empire of All Dreams, that seems to keep cropping up every now and then, in our minds, both while we're awake and while we sleep," said Rhea slowly.

Clarne remembered her own dream. Ferns and keys and an empire of something.

"Do you think this empire is real?" she asked, a far-off look in her eye.

"The blue star Cobaltus still shines at night, as a warning to one and all that the empire is coming," Rhea reminded her, "and the map you got from the Vaxen house, with that strange note, concerning gods and fate, is a bit of a give away as well."

"I suppose so. But what is this empire?" asked Clarne. "I mean, we still know almost nothing about it, other than its name. I wonder if it will change the whole of our world, and every other world, like the Anvil legend suggests."

"Don't ask me. I'm just a simple girl, not a princess or a queen," said Rhea.

"Very true, you are a simple girl!" said Clarne, smiling. "Qirune, however, true royalty if ever there was any!"

Rhea wondered if Clarne would like a plate of current buns tipped over her nice dress, but thought better of it.

"What can we do next then?" she asked.

“Enjoy the summer,” said Clarne simply.

“But I want to do something exciting,” said Rhea, looking up at the sky.

“Well, you’ll just have to wait.”

“Wait for what?” asked Rhea, puzzled.

“I don’t know. For Naylen to come back. For another dream perhaps,” said Clarne. “If this Empire of All Dreams is genuine, then I can’t believe things are going to stay quiet for very long. Some fantastic adventure will come this way soon, I’m sure.”

Not that Clarne wanted any more adventures, at least for a while. The mercury key she owned was now buried deep at the bottom of an empty crystal-sweet jar. Out of the way.

“I do hope so,” said Rhea. “It’s going to be really boring if one doesn’t.”

Later that evening, after twilight had given way to true night, Naylen sat next to his horse, looking up into a vast black sky. He took the Red Raven sceptre out of his cloak’s inside pocket and tried to gaze at its deep red colour. The small fire at his feet gave just about enough light to catch its hue. As ever, it looked amazing. Above him, the blue star Cobaltus shone with equally amazing brilliance.

“Blue Stars and Red Ravens,” said Naylen to himself. “Whatever is coming next?”

Tomorrow, he’d travel on to Cloppen Vale, to ask a few questions at a local inn, where an old friend of his worked. That would mark the real start of his quest.

In the dead of night, in Menonn’s candlelit room, he and Brandon had just found a small grey pebble, sitting in a drawer.

“I don’t remember that being there,” Menonn said, a puzzled look appearing on his face. “I mean, why would I want to keep a silly pebble in my room?”

Brandon asked if he could take a look. But it seemed very ordinary indeed. Just a small grey speckled pebble.

“Wasn’t there something about a pebble in that dream we had the other night?” offered Brandon finally.

“Possibly,” said Menonn. “I remember a bridge, lots of boiling mud, and some conversation about an empire of some sort.”

“Yes,” said Brandon, “and there were volcanoes as well!”

“Don’t recall that. But I do sort of remember catching a pebble, like this one, right at the end.”

“Well that is eerie,” said Brandon, “just like the rest of this IllumiJex candlestick goblin Vaxen dream empire business.”

Menonn had to agree with that. Life had never been the same since that red candlestick had first turned up. It was still safely locked away in the school vault, along with the equally strange tiara.

“Well, at least we now know the legendary empire promised to the goblins is called the Empire of All Dreams,” said Brandon.

Menonn thought for a moment about what Brandon had just said. An empire that could exist inside people’s minds? How creepy was that?

“But what does a little grey pebble have to do with all this?” he asked.

“No idea, but I suppose we’ll find out soon enough. I’m off to bed.”

Brandon got ready to leave.

“You be careful what you dream about,” said Menonn suddenly. “I don’t want to end up in any more of your crazy nightmares!”

“We should all be careful,” responded Brandon. “Who knows what other dreams, or nightmares, we might end up in next?”

He then left, leaving Menonn holding the small speckled pebble close to a flickering candle flame. Turning it around slowly in his fingers, he wondered what it really was. Soon a strong sense of extreme mystery and awesome adventure and intense danger came sweeping over the crippled boy. Where is all of this going, he asked himself. Chances were that some pretty incredible things were going to start happening in the not-too-distant future. Of that he was sure.

Better get some sleep then, Menonn thought. So putting the pebble back in its drawer, he got ready for bed, deciding it was probably something he could worry about some other day.

The End.

A Short Epilogue

Unfortunately, this marks the end of the book “Whispering Trees”. Hopefully, you enjoyed the story, liked the characters, and grasped some idea as to what is actually going on, though parts of the tale remain a mystery, I have to admit!

However, many of the characters in this story have already returned in a second book entitled “Crystal Skies”. So there’s no need to wait before reading the next instalment of this complex tale.

If you want to make a comment about the book, or ask a question, then you can do so at <https://wt.uk.hubb.digital>

Hence, it just remains for me to say goodbye, or as the people of Cillic would say, “May your ship endure the storm!”